The Cradle Ship

Edith Howes

"High above the Town" (*see page 12*)

The Cradle Ship

By Edith Howes

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TO

MR. A. H. GRINLING

AT WHOSE SUGGESTION THIS BOOK
WAS WRITTEN, IN THE HOPE OF
PERMANENT BENEFIT TO
CHILDREN

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SINGING FISH

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Cassell's

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THE CRADLE SHIP

CHAPTER I

FAIRY MOTHER

WIN and Twin, on their way home after their trip with the fairy rings,* were met at the railway station by their father.

"We have a surprise at home for you," he said.

"What is it?" the twins asked together.

Their father laughed.

"It wouldn't be a real surprise if I told you now," he said. "Wait and see."

It was hard to wait, until Win began to tell him of their wonder-trip. Then the twins talked so fast, and Father was so astonished, and they all grew so excited, that the surprise was forgotten till they reached home.

Mother met them at the door, with her dearest "welcome home" smile and kisses. "We have a surprise for you!" she too said; and she led them through the house to the back veranda. "Walk softly," she said.

Win was the first to see the cradle.

"Oh, Mother!" she cried, and her face was all aglow. She ran on tiptoe to the cradle. Yes, it was true! There lay a real baby, fast asleep. She

* "Fairy Rings." By Edith Howes. (Cassell & Co., Ltd.)

knelt beside it, and gazed and gazed. "A baby!" she whispered. "Is it ours, Mother? Our very own, to keep?"

"Our very own, to keep," smiled Mother.

"Oh, isn't it lovely!" Win went on whispering. "Look at the dear little hands! Twin, you are glad, surely!"

Twin was kneeling by the other side of the cradle.

"Of course I am. There are nails on its hands already," he said in surprise. "Can it open its eyes?"

"When he is awake he can," said Mother.

"Kittens can't see at first," Twin said. "Not for ever so long. Nor puppies either."

"Babies can," said Mother.

"Oh, I do wish he would wake up," said Win. "I do want to see his eyes."

"Come and take off your hats and coats," said Mother. "You shall see his eyes by and by. And you shall see the whole of him when I put him in his bath."

It was the next day that a question began to puzzle Win.

"Where did Mother get our baby?" she asked Twin.

"I don't know," he replied. "I was wondering about that myself. We'll go and ask her."

They went into the sitting-room, but Mother was not there. Granny was dusting the chairs.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Now it was a little secret between Win and Twin that "Town Granny" was not quite so dear and cuddly as "Grandma at the farm": but Win thought

she might do as well for answering questions, so she asked :

" Granny, where do babies come from ? "

" Babies ? Oh, people find them under gooseberry bushes," said Granny.

The twins rushed out into the garden.

" We might find another," said Twin.

But half-way down the path Win stopped short

" It wasn't a really truly answer," she said.

" Win ! "

" Well, it wasn't. I can *feel* that it wasn't. Besides, think how many days we've played round those gooseberry bushes. Wouldn't we have seen a baby if it had been there ? "

Twin kicked his heels.

" Have one look, to make sure," he said.

" Very well," said Win. " But I know there won't be one."

They looked, lifting the laden branches and peering carefully under every bush. Of course, there was not a baby to be found.

" Nasty scratchy places ! " said Win, whose finger was bleeding from a thorn. " No one would be cruel enough to put a baby under there, I am sure."

" I wonder why Granny told us such a story," said Twin.

" We'll go in and ask her for a really truly answer,' Win said. They went to Granny again.

" You ask this time," said Win, turning shy when she saw Granny.

Twin spoke up bravely.

" Please, Granny, will you tell us *truly* where babies come from ? "

Granny looked quite cross.

"Don't ask such questions," she said sharply. "It's rude. Run away and don't be naughty."

The children went slowly outside. Rude! Their faces were red, and they didn't speak to one another, for somehow they felt ashamed. It was a horrid feeling; they couldn't understand it at all. "We didn't mean to be rude!" was all Win could think; but she didn't say it aloud.

They played in the garden, not very happily at first; but presently the two little girls from next door came in, and they all had a good romp, and the twins forgot Granny's crossness.

But that night Win woke from sleep, feeling miserable. She wanted Mother, though she couldn't remember why. She wondered if it was very late; but no, it couldn't be, for she could hear Mother's voice: dear Mother singing in the sitting-room. She would get up and go to her.

She slipped out of bed and tiptoed along the passage to the sitting-room door. There she stood still, not daring to go in. Granny might be with Mother. Granny was always with Mother now. Granny might say, "Go to bed! Don't be naughty!" Or perhaps "That's rude!" What a dreadful word that was! Somehow, it made you feel so hot. She turned hot now when she thought of it. Oh, why had Granny come to stay with them?

Mother's voice was the sweetest in the whole world. She was singing softly, as if the baby lay in her lap or in the cradle beside her, and she was so happy that she must sing. Now she stopped, and then began all over again. Win could hear the words:

" The world lies stilled in mist,
Baby dear, baby dear.
Where cloud and earth have kissed,
Baby, O baby dear.
But out of the stillness there comes a croon,
Mother bird singing to shrouded moon:
'My babies are coming out soon, ah, soon!'
Slumber, my baby dear.

" We wait the sun-kissed day,
Baby dear, baby dear.
Watching the night away,
Baby, O baby dear.
Mother birds, baby birds, you, Love, and I,
Warm in the house or out under the sky,
Awake for the dawn and the glad by and by.
Slumber, my baby dear.

" What will the future bring?
Baby dear, baby dear.
Will birdies sweetly sing?
Baby, O baby dear.
And what of your voice in the shrouded years?
Will its music ring true to listening ears?
Will it call to joy, or heart-broken tears?
But slumber, oh, slumber yet, Baby, my dear."

Win crept back to the bedroom. She was crying, though she hardly knew why, unless it was because Mother's voice sounded so loving and yet so shut away from her. She crossed to Twin's bed.

" Twin! " she said. " Twin! "

" I am awake," said Twin. " Where did you go to? "

"To the sitting-room. But the door was shut. I wanted to go to Mother, but Granny might be there."

"What's the matter, Win? Are you sick?"

"Not sick. But, Twin, Mother will tell us about babies. She won't be cross. I want to ask her, if only Granny won't be there."

"I'll come with you, Win. Never mind if Granny is there. Of course, Mother will tell us."

Hand in hand the two little white-robed children trotted along the passage to the sitting-room door. Twin turned the handle, and they peeped in. Joy, Granny was not there. Mother sat sewing alone, but for the baby asleep in his cradle.

She looked up in astonishment at the children.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

The twins fairly ran at her. Win snuggled into her lap and Twin hung round her neck. Mother's arms were about them both in an instant, and her kisses were very comforting; but she was puzzled.

"What is it?" she asked again. "Has something frightened you?"

"No," said Twin; "but we thought Granny might be here, and we are glad she is not."

"Why, dear?"

"Because we asked her where babies come from, and she said we were rude, and so to-night Win was crying, and I came with her to ask you, even if Granny was here."

Mother began to understand; but before she could speak Win's flushed face was laid against hers, and a choking little voice asked:

"Was it rude, Mother?"

" No, darling," said Mother very gently. " Granny made a mistake—that was all. She didn't understand. Of course, you want to know where babies come from ; all boys and girls do. And you shall know. I have been so busy with my little new baby that I haven't had time to take you. But you shall go to-night."

The twins were beaming now.

" Go ? Where ? " they asked.

" To Babyland," she said. " There you shall see things for yourselves. Dress, and I will take you at once."

She took them to their room, lit the lamp, and left them to dress. When they went back to the sitting-room she was standing in the middle of the floor with the baby in her arms, and Father was looking at her and saying : " Well, I shall come too. You will want someone to make the poetry, you know."

Father made beautiful poetry. Mother admired it immensely ; so did the twins.

" Of course you must come," said Mother. " We couldn't go without you, nor without Baby. The whole family shall go. Granny will take care of the house.

" We must have an airship," she went on. " Somebody lift the cradle, please."

Father lifted the cradle, and Mother touched it with her hand. It suddenly grew large, and floated in the air by itself, and two white sails shot out from its sides like wings. The cradle had become a ship.

" Oh, look ! Mother is a fairy ! " cried Win. A fairy she was. Gauzy wings stood up from her

shoulders, her frock had changed to long, shining robes, and she was more beautiful than ever.

The twins danced round her.

"Mother was a fairy all the time, and we didn't know it till now!" they cried.

She smiled at them.

"Mother is a fairy, and Father is a poet, and the twins have the power to hear and see as the fairies hear and see, so we are sure to find out everything," she said. "Now let us go."

She stepped into the ship, sitting in front to steer. The baby lay in her lap. Father and the twins followed; there were seats for all.

"Open, Wall, and let us through!" said the Fairy Mother. The wall opened to let them through, and closed again behind them. Out they sailed into the starlit night.

CHAPTER II

BABYLAND

OVER the garden they went, then over the trees and high above the town. It was a glorious sail.

"Hurrah! We are going for another wonder-trip!" cried Twin.

"We have Mother and Father with us this time, and that makes it nicer," Win added.

They sailed over fields and hills and seas. At first everything was dark and shadowy; but they went so swiftly that at last they passed the Night and caught up with the Day as she flew across the world. Now there was light everywhere, and they could see far below them the little islands that dotted the sea, and the steamers going to and fro.

On they went, through the bright morning sunshine. Suddenly a thick black cloud barred their way.

"You can't stop us!" Mother called.

"You must not take your children to Babyland!" shouted a voice from behind the cloud.

"I will. It is right for them to go," Mother replied; and she steered the ship into the very middle of the cloud.

For a few moments it was dark and foggy. Then the air cleared, and the twins, looking back, saw the cloud behind them. At one end stood an old, old man, and at the other an old, old woman, holding

the cloud in its place. They looked angrily at the ship.

"Those children of yours will come to grief!" they shrieked.

Mother laughed gaily.

"Not at all!" she called in her sweet voice. "I am steering them to safety."

"Who are they?" asked Twin.

"They are Mr. and Mrs. Darken," said Mother. "They are very ignorant people, who think it wrong that children should go where they did not go when they were children."

"Poor old things!" said Father. "They did try to go. When they were as young as you they wanted to see Babyland too, but they had no fairy mother to take them in a fairy ship. They and all the other children made a queer little boat from such scraps as they could pick up and put together, and in that they sailed across the sea to find Babyland. But they came to the great cloud which somebody else was holding up, and there was no fairy in their boat to guide it through, so they had to stay on the other side. They tried to peer through, but the cloud made Babyland look dark and ugly and upside down. They couldn't see anything beautiful in it. And while they waited about, a storm came on that wrecked the boat on the rocks, and some of them were drowned. Ever since then these two have tried to keep all children from seeing Babyland."

"Is it an ugly place, then?" asked Win in a disappointed tone.

"Look below!" said Mother. She stopped the ship.

Win and Twin looked over the side. Beneath them lay a wide sunny land, stretching as far as they could see, and more beautiful than any they had left behind. There were mountains in it, shining softly pink and blue and purple, and capped with glistening snow; there were rivers like streams of silver; there were deep green valleys and golden plains and beaches, and rainbow-coloured inlets of the sea. Over all shone the morning sun, making such a sparkle and glow that the twins were almost dazzled.

"Oh, it is lovely! lovely!" said Win. "Is it really truly Babyland?"

"Really truly Babyland it is," said Mother. "I will take you slowly down."

She set the ship moving very gently downwards, and they began to see more and more of the beautiful land. It was gay with flowers and fruits hanging in bright colours everywhere. Little wild animals, soft and furry, crossed the plains or played along the river banks. Brilliant birds flashed from tree to tree, or poured out happy songs from hidden resting-places in the boughs.

Clear above their singing rose another music, sweeter than anything the twins had ever heard.

"What is that?" asked Win. "It sounds like fairy music."

"So it is," said Mother. "It is the love-song of the mothers when their little ones are born. All the mothers sing it—bird-mothers, flower-mothers——"

"Flower-mothers!" cried Win. "Then are there flower-babies, too?"

"What a question! What ignorance!" said

a sudden, sharp voice beside them. The twins jumped.

The strange voice came from a big pine tree whose branches the ship had almost touched on her way to the land. Mother stopped the ship, and Twin spoke to the tree.

"Do you have babies?" he asked.

The pine shook herself. A cone above Twin's head opened in a dozen places, and little winged things came fluttering down like golden butterflies.

"Oh, how pretty!" said Win. She caught some as they fell, and looked at them. "Seeds!" she said. "Seeds with wings!"

"My babies!" said the tree proudly. "Are they not beautiful?"

"I did not know such pretty things were hidden in those hard brown cones," said Twin, watching a fresh shower as it fell.

"Fancy not knowing about my babies!" said the pine. "I must tell you their story. Two springs ago I blossomed for the first time. Little red mother-cones and yellow father-flowers came on my branches. In the red cones lay little seed-eggs, two on each flap. The wind blew the yellow pollen from the father-flowers on to the little seed-eggs in the red cones, and then the cones shut their flaps and began to harden. There they have hung for these two years, growing large and brown, and so strong that the sun could not crack them, the rain could not soften them, and storms could not break them off. And all the time, shut tightly in the warm cone-mothers, each little seed-egg and pollen grain joined together, were growing into a beautiful seed-baby,

with a wing as fine and light as the petal of a rose. Now they are all ready to come out, so the hard flaps of the cones grow long-stemmed and spring open. Out flutter the little babies on their pretty wings, to be carried by the wind to good growing places."

"Thank you," said Win. "That is a lovely story."

"Do all trees have babies?" asked Twin.

"Of course. How could we make forests if we didn't? There would be no young ones to take our places when we are gone. We can't live for ever, you know."

"No, I suppose not," said Twin thoughtfully. "How long can you live?"

"Oh, a few hundred years, if no one cuts us down."

A few hundred years! The children stared at the tree.

"That is a very long time," said Win. "Are you sure?"

The pine was offended. "Very well. You needn't believe me," she said sulkily. "Go and ask the oak over there."

Mother steered the ship to the oak tree.

"How long will you live?" Twin asked.

"Oh, hundreds of years," replied the oak in a drowsy way. "Perhaps a thousand." She seemed half asleep.

"Please may we see your babies?" asked Win

"My babies!" The oak seemed to wake up. "Of course you shall see them, the darlings."

She shook a branch beside Win.

"Lift the leaves," she said. "The babies are under them."

Win looked, and Twin looked over her shoulder.

"I see some tiny green things," said Win in a disappointed tone, "but they are so very small!"

"They have been smaller still, and they are going to be bigger," said the oak. "Look farther along the branch. Do you see tiny, red mother-flowers, and yellow father-catkins hanging on long, green threads?"

"Oh, yes, here they are," said Twin. "What funny little things!"

"Pretty, I call them," said the oak in a hurt tone. "You needn't apologise," she went on before Twin could speak; "but pretend you are the wind, and shake some of the pollen from the father-catkins on to the mother-flowers."

Twin lifted the catkins and shook them over the mother-flowers. A little cloud of pollen floated out.

"Thank you," said the tree. "Now the seed-eggs in the red flowers will grow into acorns."

"Acorns! Oh, acorns! Now I can see what these wee green things are going to be," cried Win.

"Yes, acorns! My smooth green babies in their pretty cup-cradles," sang the oak in a lullaby voice. "Rest and grow, little babies of mine, soon you shall be springing trees." She seemed to be dozing again.

"Your babies haven't any wings," said Twin.

She roused herself a little. "Wings? No; but they will be able to roll. And they will have plenty of food—food within their shining skins to last them many a day."

"Will it be two years before they fall?" Win asked.

"Oh, dear me, no! They are not so slow as the pine-tree babies. A few months. A few months. Excuse my sleepiness," she said. "It's the sun on my head, you know. I am often like this in these warm mornings." Her voice died quite away.

Mother laughed. "I smell violets," she said. "Suppose we look for them."

No wonder she could smell violets. There lay a great patch of them, sweet and blue with blossoms. The scent came up in waves.

"Oh, please don't crush us!" they called, as the Cradle Ship came down.

"Don't be afraid," said Mother. "We shall not touch you."

She stopped the ship just over their heads. "I have brought my babies to see your babies," she said.

"Mother! We are not babies!" cried Twin.

Mother only laughed and kissed him.

The twins looked over the edge of the ship, and a hundred little faces looked up at them, each set in the middle of a violet plant.

"Have you father-flowers and mother-flowers?" asked Twin.

"Father and mother live together in one house, one little house with soft blue walls and the sweetest scent in the world!" came from the face in the biggest plant.

"You mean your blossoms," said Win. She raised one to look at it.

"Are you a fairy?" asked Twin.

"Yes. Lift the little orange flaps in the middle," she said to Win. "Please do it gently. Under them you will see the wee stamen-fathers, and in the middle stands up the pistil-mother. She is tall and thin there, but she is full and round lower down, because there the seed-eggs lie waiting for the pollen grains to make them grow into sweet white babies."

"But how can the wind get in there to shake the pollen off?" asked Twin.

"He can't! We don't want him to!" cried the fairy. "It is a bee we are waiting for. She will break the pollen bags when she dips her long tongue into the honey-spur. We like her to come, because she may bring pollen on her hairs from another plant, and that makes the very best babies. That is why the mother raises her head high above the little fathers in her house. She wants pollen from another flower; the little fathers may send their pollen to other mothers"

Father asked a question. "Suppose no bee comes? Violets bloom so early in the year that sometimes the bees are not out of their winter sleep."

"It doesn't matter. We can manage without them. We grow smaller closed flowers later on. Haven't you noticed them under the leaves? In these the mothers do not stand taller than the fathers, but take their pollen thankfully as the fine bags burst. So dear little babies can still grow. Sometimes their mother opens and scatters them on the ground; sometimes she pushes herself under the ground and opens there, where the babies are safe and sure to grow."

"*Zing, zing, zing!*" It was a bee flying fast

to the violets. Another followed, and another. The tiny fairies were all excitement at once. They lifted their pretty heads high above the leaves and called: "Please come to my flowers! Please come to my flowers!" The bees hurried from honey-spur to honey-spur, rustling and singing as they went, and dusting themselves with pollen.

The children watched, smiling with pleasure at the pretty scene.

"There is a grassy patch beyond the violets," said Win. "Couldn't we stand on that? I want to be close to the flowers and bees."

Mother took the ship to the grassy patch, and Win stepped out. The instant she touched the grass, instead of bending to the violets she stooped to the earth as if listening. "There is someone singing under the ground!" she said.

They all stepped out and bent to listen. "It is the song of the bulbs," said Mother.

"It has stopped!" cried Twin, with a disappointed face. "Just as we came, too! No—there it is again—here, nearer me this time."

They crowded round and listened. A sweet song came up in a tiny voice from below their feet:

"Sleep, little baby flower,
Safe here, and warm.
No frost can come, nor shower,
No cruel storm.

"Rest, little bud of mine,
Flower in the ground
My body, white and fine,
Wraps you around.

"Grow, little flower so bright!
Rest time is done.
Push through my body white,
Up to the sun.

"Fair is the world above;
Spring waits for you.
Go from your mother's love,
Spring work to do.

"Here in the dark I'll stay,
Feed you each hour.
Up where the sunbeams play,
There bloom, my flower"

Win was just going to say, "What a pretty song!" when a sudden ringing of bells made everybody look round. A little fairy in a blue silk frock came flying past, ringing a great stalk of bluebells.

"A holiday! A holiday!" she called. "A fairy-mother has brought her little ones to Babyland. You are free, my sisters, free to fly."

She smiled at Mother as she passed, and Mother smiled back; but before the wondering twins could ask what she meant, a soft fluttering sounded all round them, and in a moment the air was filled with flower-babies. They rose from the violet patch in a purple cloud, the tiny, bright-eyed fairies who had talked to the twins from the centres of the plants; they broke through the ground at the children's feet—tall daffodil fairies in yellow satin, snowdrop fairies in pure white, lily fairies in orange, scarlet or gold; they came flying from round about, pansy fairies in velvet, apple fairies in palest pink, rose fairies and daisy fairies, fairies from every flower

"Fairies from every Flower and Tree"

and tree. When they saw Mother, they all smiled and bowed to her. Then they flew up and down, laughing and talking like children let loose from school; whirling and chasing one another till the air was filled with their colours. It was a beautiful sight!

The oak fairy came flitting from her tree, wide awake and smiling. She was dressed in pale green, and on her head she wore a pretty crinkled cap, very like one of her acorn cups. She flew to the fairy ship and sat on its mast, looking at Mother.

"Thank you for setting us free," she said.

"How? What did Mother do?" asked the twins, both together.

The fairy laughed at them. "Really, I am surprised that you know so little about your own mother," she said.

She waved her hand at the other fairies.

"See how happy they are," she said. "That is because you are here. Year after year we live in our plants, caring for them and never free to leave them. But whenever a fairy-mother brings her children to Babyland we all have a holiday, tree fairies and flower fairies too. Our wings suddenly grow—wings that will last only one day—and we are free to fly where we like and do as we like."

"How nice!" said Win.

"Nice! I should think so. If you lived in a tree for hundreds of years you would be glad of a change, I can tell you."

"I am so glad Mother is a fairy-mother," said Win.

"But you—are you not a fairy-mother, too?" asked Twin.

"No," replied the oak fairy. "We are fairies, but not mothers. We take care of the mothers and fathers and babies too, but to be both a fairy and a mother is a wonderful thing. Well, I must make the most of my time. I only stopped to say thank you. Good-bye."

"A meeting! A meeting of flower fairies in the Hall of Rose Petals! We are to speak of our grievances and see what can be done."

It was Bluebell again, ringing her chimes. She paused beside the Cradle Ship.

"We are all grateful to you," she said to Mother. "Is there anything we can do to show our gratitude?"

"May we come to the meeting?" asked Mother.

"Nothing would give us greater pleasure," replied Bluebell. "Please wait one moment; things must be done properly."

She flew in amongst the fairies, said something quickly, and came back surrounded by a fluttering crowd. In front of Mother they all stopped, raised their wings above their heads, and spread their hands out before them. "We ask you to honour us by attending our meeting in the Hall of Rose Petals," they said, speaking all together.

"Thank you," said Mother, bowing politely; "we shall be delighted to come."

"We will show you the way," they said.

Mother stepped into the Cradle Ship and took her place at the helm. Father and the twins took their seats, and off they started. The fairies flew high and low beside them, some over and some under the ship, some going on far ahead, and some returning to talk with the family.

CHAPTER III

THE HALL OF ROSE PETALS

CLOSE above the trees sailed the Cradle Ship, while the twins hung over the edge to see what lay below. Flowers and fruit from every country grew here together, and all seasons were in full swing at once. One grape vine was hung with ripe grapes; the next was only blossoming. One almond tree was white with bloom, the next hid green almonds under its summer suit of leaves, the next was scattering ripe nuts on the ground.

"I should like to eat some of those almonds," said Twin. "May we gather some?"

The fairies looked at him in horror, and Mother shook her head at him.

"Not in Babyland," she said. "You mustn't eat the babies here."

A wonderful look came into her eyes.

"No one in this ship shall be hungry while in Babyland!" she said slowly; and so strong was her fairy power that until they reached home again not one of the family felt any wish to eat.

A slender fairy, white and delicate as a snowflake, floated to the ship and sat on its edge, close to Win.

"We are coming to my tree," she said. "Look, there it is, covered with blossoms as white as my wings. How they glisten in the sun, my pretty silky

blossoms! You can hear the hum of the bees as they carry the father-pollen to the waiting mother-pistils. Deep in each blossom lie my seed-babies. The shining petals will fall away, but little green balls will be left swelling round the babies while they grow. At last the tree will stand gleaming with plums, hanging in rich clusters that weigh the branches almost to the ground. And in the middle of each plum will lie the precious baby, grown into a nut, and cased for safety in a hard, thick shell. You should see my tree then. It will be splendid."

"It is splendid now," said Win, looking back at it. She glanced below. "Oh!" she cried. "What is that strange place down there?"

The fairies were all sighing and looking vexed, and Father and Twin were as puzzled as she was.

"It is That Dreadful Garden," said the fairy. "A shocking sight, isn't it?"

It was indeed a shocking sight. Everything that grew in it was blighted and twisted and ugly. The leaves were eaten away by caterpillars, almost to the skeleton, and the flowers were pale and ill and miserable. The tears came into Mother's eyes when she looked at the poor things.

"What is the matter with them?" asked Win.

"No care!" said the fairy. "No care!"

"But why do you have such a horrid place in Babyland?" asked Twin.

"We wouldn't have it here if we could help it," said the fairy sadly. "That garden is one of our great troubles. You must know that all fairies are not good—some are lazy and thoughtless It is they who live in That Dreadful Garden They take no

care of their flower-babies, but leave them to grow up as best they may. And you see how the poor things suffer. But I can't bear to think about them," she said. "Let us talk of something else."

"I shall make some poetry about your plum babies," said Father.

"I was wondering when you were going to begin," said Mother.

"It has only just come into my head. It goes like this:

"Swinging and swaying, and swaying and swinging
Rocked in the sunlit air,
Close to their mothers white babies are clinging,
Little seed-babies so fair.

"Glowing and gleaming, and gleaming and glowing,
Purple amongst the green,
Mothers rock on while babies are growing,
Babies that cannot be seen.

"Hiding and growing, and growing and hiding,
Babies are pretty and round.
Down through the branches the mothers go gliding,
Bearing their babes to the ground.

"Swinging and swaying, and swaying and swinging,
Rocked by the summer breeze,
Up from the ground the green babies are springing,
Springing as beautiful trees."

The fairy looked pleased, but before anything could be said the ship touched the ground and stopped. They had reached the Hall of Rose Petals.

It was a beautiful place. Walls and roof were

of red rose petals, set edge to edge like little panes of ruby glass. There was no need of windows, for the light shone through the petals in a soft pink glow that made the fairies look even prettier than when they were outside.

The doors were flung widely open, and as Mother led the way into the hall the fairies all bowed to her as though she were a queen. The twins did feel proud to belong to her!

There were no seats; the family had to stand. The fairies did not want to sit; they were flying up and down every moment, so glad were they to be able to move. Indeed, it was a good thing there was a roof to the hall, for their flights would have taken them out of sight if there had not been, and their speeches would never have been heard.

One of them began to speak now, from her place in the air. Her wings fluttered all the time, and every now and then she took a short flight up and down again. The other fairies seemed quite used to it, but the twins thought it very strange, and Father whispered more than once, "I wish she would keep still."

"Sisters," she said, "we have met to talk of our grievances. Our first and greatest grievance is the lack of movement, both for ourselves and the plants in which we live. We may leave our homes only when a fairy-mother brings her little ones to Baby-land"—she smiled down at Mother—"our plants may never leave them at all. Insects move, birds move, fishes move, animals move; why should not plants move? Why should they not walk or run or fly or swim? Why should they stay in one spot

all their lives, able to live only if their food and water lies round about them, and depending on the wind or insects for the carrying of their pollen? Why should they not be free to search for better food if they have need of it, free to move from place to place to find the pollen they would choose?"

A columbine fairy shot up beside her.

"We must not waste our precious time over this old grievance," she said. "We have talked about it on other holidays, and we have always found that nothing can be done. Our plants are not made for freedom; they have neither legs nor wings nor fins. Certainly the baby seeds often travel long distances; they are winged to sail on the wind, or spiked to cling to moving animals, or flung far out to fresh soil by their careful mothers. But these movements last only for a little while. When the babies grow into plants they settle down to live a quiet life, and we must stay with them to care for them. All this cannot be helped; let us talk of things that can be helped.

"There is that matter of stolen honey, for instance, from which so many of us suffer. As you know, we take the very greatest pains to see that our father-stamens and mother-pistils stand where the bee who pushes in for honey must touch them, to cross the pollen from flower to flower, so that the babies may be strong. But many a bee is too lazy to enter by the front door and take the honey in a proper manner; she bites a hole in the honey spur at the back of the flower and steals the honey. She never comes near the pollen. The honey is there to be given to her, but she would rather steal it than

go to a little trouble to get it. She gets all and does nothing. It is not fair!"

"I always said those honey-spurs were a mistake," said a daisy fairy.

"Not at all," replied Columbine. "Where bees are not lazy the honey-spurs are a most successful plan for crossing. Don't you agree with me, Nasturtium?"

"Yes," said Nasturtium; "but the trouble is that bees so often are lazy. Especially humble bees. I have sometimes had to shorten my spur to little more than a point, so that they should be forced to go in at the front door."

Columbine took a quick flight and went on with her speech.

"Something should be done to put this matter right. Nothing is more important than the life and health of the babies, and for that we cannot do without our insect friends, any more than they can do without us. While we are free to move, some of us should go and ask the bees for a promise of better behaviour."

"Hear, hear!" said Foxglove and Larkspur and a number of others.

Canterbury Bell sprang high into the air and hung fluttering her wings.

"There is a greater grievance than that; one that troubles all of us," she said. "It is That Dreadful Garden."

The fairies were still and sad in an instant.

"It is becoming more and more dangerous," Canterbury Bell went on. "It has been so neglected that now every plant is diseased. Insects coming

from that garden are bringing bad pollen to our flowers. Our babies will be ill and die, or they will grow up poor, stunted things that we shall be ashamed of. Indeed, if things go on as they are, you spurred flowers may well be glad if no bee enters by the front door to bring pollen from such an evil place. Something must be done. We must protect our babies."

There was a silence. Nobody seemed to have a plan.

"Why don't you send a message?" asked Mother. "Or go and show the lazy fairies what to do? Perhaps they don't know how to take care of their garden."

Everybody began to answer her at once.

"We have sent dozens of messages."

"They told us to mind our own business."

"We went last holiday, but they drove us away."

"They wouldn't listen to us."

"They said the garden was theirs, and they would do what they liked with it."

"They jeered at us for being anxious about our babies."

"I will go and see what I can do," said Mother. "I can't bear the thought of those poor, neglected children."

"Will you? Will you really?" asked the fairies. They crowded round Mother. "Oh, if you can make things better we shall be so glad, so very glad."

"I will go at once," said Mother.

"Come!" she said to Father and the twins. They followed her into the Cradle Ship, and she set it moving towards the Dreadful Garden. The flower fairies came flying after it.

The lazy fairies in the Dreadful Garden peeped out of their plants at their visitors. Most of them had untidy hair and unwashed faces.

"Fairies with dirty faces!" Win whispered in a shocked voice.

"And just look at their torn frocks!" said Twin.

"Good morning!" Mother called in her kind voice. "May we see your dear little babies?"

The lazy fairies looked at her, and then at one another, but nobody spoke.

Mother stepped out of the ship and stooped over a rose.

"Oh, the poor flowers!" she said. "They are all twisted and badly shaped. They will never open, and their seed-eggs must die."

The rose fairy's face grew very red, but she tossed her head and tried to look as if she didn't care.

Mother stooped still lower to a pansy bed.

"Sick little pansy babies!" she said. "So small and thin and white! How badly you have been treated!"

"Don't come meddling," the pansy fairies said. "These children don't belong to you."

"I should be ashamed to own such neglected children," said Mother quietly.

She stood up very straight and tall, and noticed everything in the garden: babies shrivelled and starved, babies sick and dying, babies dead and mildewed. The wonderful look came into her eyes, and the fairies shivered in fear, for they felt her mother power.

"Come to me!" she called; and the untidy fairies had to trail unwillingly from their plants.

flying slowly on the holiday wings which they had been too lazy to use. When they all stood in front of her, Mother spoke:

"Your plants are bad enough," she said, "but your babies are worse. They are in a shocking state. Nothing in the whole world is of greater importance than healthy children, and yet you allow these to be always ill. You don't seem to understand that they need care and watchfulness—that you must work, *work*, WORK if they are to grow up well and strong and safe from their enemies. All their lives are ruined, unless you give them a good start. Yet with you it is not work, work, work, but shirk, shirk, shirk. What are you going to do about it?"

The fairies looked at the ground and fidgeted. At last one said:

"Your power is stronger than ours. We shall have to do as you tell us."

"Good," said Mother. "Then here are my commands. Clear away the blight and the caterpillars; give your plants space and air and light; and remember that babies must have your care every day and all the day till they are big enough to look after themselves. And for goodness' sake wash your faces and make yourselves tidy," she said as she turned away.

The fairies were meek enough now. They hadn't a word to say, but they flew to their plants and began to work at once. The family left them as busy as bees.

"Thank you—thank you!" said the waiting flower fairies as the Cradle Ship returned over the garden wall. "We are most grateful."

"Now for the bees!" said Columbine.

"May we come with you?" asked Mother.

"We shall be most pleased to have you, if you will make yourselves small. Even I shall have to shrink before I can move about in the hive."

She dwindled as she spoke. In a second she stood no higher than a bee, though she was as perfectly made and as beautiful as before.

CHAPTER IV

FLOWER FAIRIES

MOTHER turned to the family.

" Let us all be flower fairies ! " she said. " Father, what flower do you choose ? "

" Red-hot poker," said Father with a smile.

Mother laid her hand on his, the wonderful look shining in her eyes.

" Red-hot poker ! " she said slowly.

Father shrank and shrank till there he stood, a tiny man-fairy no bigger than a bee, dressed in a bright orange suit, with wings and cap of scarlet.

How the twins did enjoy that ! They laughed and laughed.

" Oh, oh, oh ! " they chuckled. " What a tiny father ! " Even Mother could not help smiling.

It was still Father's face that laughed up at them, though his voice was very small.

" You will be tinier directly," he said. " Wait till I get you down here. I'll teach you to laugh at your father. You won't find me so small then."

" Win, what flower do you choose ? " asked Mother.

" Salvia—blue salvia," said Win.

Mother touched her and said " Salvia ! " and Win shrank and found herself in a soft velvet frock of the loveliest shade of blue. She was smaller than Father now, and somehow he looked quite big.

" What are my wings like ? " she asked.

"Bright blue," said Twin; "and so fine that I can see through them. And you are so small that I could hide you with a button."

"Twin, your flower?" asked Mother.

"Daisy!" said Twin.

In a moment he, too, stood smaller than Father. His suit was white, with a cap of yellow, and yellow wings. Father tickled both children to punish them for laughing at him, which, of course, made them laugh all the more.

"Ready!" said Mother.

She had changed herself into a pansy fairy, dressed in a gown of purple velvet. Her wings were black and gold, and in her arms lay Baby, a tiny snowdrop fairy in purest white.

"Baby will be able to fly now!" cried Win.

"His wings are not strong enough," said Mother. "Besides, he is so new and so dear that I can't spare him from my arms."

"Come!" called Columbine.

They rose into the air and followed her to the home of the wild bees, in the hollow of an old tree.

In front of the opening a big drone hovered lazily in the sunshine, buzzing a drowsy tune

"What do you want?" he asked.

"We bring a message to the bees," said Columbine.

"We are too busy to listen to messages," said the drone sleepily; "far too busy. We have no time for anything. You can't come in." He hung in front of the opening.

Columbine laughed.

"You busy!" she said. "But lazy people always talk as if they really did things. Let me speak

to the workers." She pushed past him through the opening, and the rest followed.

"Is he a useless fellow?" asked Twin.

"Not exactly useless," Columbine replied. "He is a father bee, and all fathers have to give some help in starting the babies. But he does nothing else; the workers have to bring in his food and tidy up the place after him, just as though he were a big baby."

In the hive all was bustle. Workers were busy everywhere, some putting honey in the cells, some sealing the cells, some making wax, some feeding the babies, some fanning fresh air into the hive with their wings. At first it seemed that nobody had time to attend to the little fairies, though everybody gave them a quick look as they passed between the streets of waxen cells. Presently, however, a little group gathered round Columbine, and she gave her message.

But Mother had caught sight of a longer, slenderer bee than any of the others, and she took the family away to talk to her.

"It is the Queen!" she said.

The Queen was moving gracefully along over rows of empty cells.

"What is she doing with her sting?" asked Win.

The Queen heard her and looked round quickly.

"I am not using my sting," she said. "I am placing my eggs."

She pointed the fine end of her body into a cell, then drew away. There in the bottom of the cell lay a tiny, silver-white egg, oval and shining.

"How quick!" cried Twin. "Do you often do that?"

"I have already laid ten thousand eggs," she replied proudly.

Ten thousand! The twins looked at one another.

"You must be tired," said Win.

"Tired? Why should I be? It is my work, and I love it. If I grew tired we should never keep the hive going."

"Do you lay all the eggs?" Twin asked.

"Every one. I am the mother of the whole hive."

The twins gazed at her in wonder.

"You must have thousands of those little eggs in your body," said Twin.

"Yes, thousands."

"But the father—I thought he had to help?" said Win.

"Of course he has," said the Queen. "He gave me his little grains. They are in an inside pocket." She stroked her golden coat where the pocket lay beneath. "The little grains join with my little grains to make the eggs which grow into the precious babies."

A worker bee came suddenly before the Queen.

"New babies, your Majesty!" she said.

"Which comb?" asked the Queen.

"Second from the middle, north side," replied the worker. She hurried off.

The Queen's eyes shone, and her feelers shook with joy. "The darlings! I must go and see them," she said. She hurried off after the workers, and the family followed her.

When she came to the second comb from the middle, north side, she went more slowly, stopping

for a moment to look lovingly into each cell as she passed. For there lay rows of the tiniest, whitest, dearest babies, just hatched from the eggs. They had as yet neither wings nor legs nor feelers, and they were being fed by workers, each in turn.

"I think they need more fresh air," said the Queen anxiously; and a bee hurried off to tell the fanners at the door what was wanted. In a few moments a stream of cool fresh air came up through the heat of the hive, and the Queen looked happy again.

She stood on the edge of the comb and began to sing, and the family listened with delight, for it was the love-song of the mothers, the sweetest music ever made. Mother held Baby very closely, and bent over him with a shining look, and Father took out his note-book and began to write down the words. It was a very tiny notebook now, with a pencil no thicker than a hair. Win and Twin looked over his shoulder while he wrote:

"Life of my life! You come at last.
We waited, the world and I.
Joy of my heart! The waiting is past,
For here in your beauty you lie.

"Hope of the hours! The sun is bright,
The beautiful sky is blue.
Dream of the days! The world all alight
Is glad with its welcome to you.

"Life of my life, so loved, so near!
We waited, the world and I.
Joy of my heart, most precious, most dear!
How sweet in your beauty you lie!"

The Queen stopped.

" I must lay more eggs ! " she said, and hurried off.

A worker came to Mother with a message.

" Columbine is waiting for you at the door," she said.

" We are coming," said Mother.

As they passed the middle comb the twins heard a little voice say :

" No more food, thank you. I feel sleepy."

A full-fed baby bee lay there, half filling the cell, but still without wings or feelers or legs.

" You must be walled in while you change," said the nurse.

" You are all so busy ! What am I to do ? " It was a young bee that spoke now. She had just come out through the hole she had bitten in the wall of her cell. She had her wings and feelers and legs, but her fur was as pale as a biscuit, and she stood looking about her as if frightened at the hurrying crowds.

" Come out into the sunshine, my dear, and learn to use your wings," said a worker who was passing. The new bee followed the old one, and the family followed them both.

" I am sorry to hurry you away," said Columbine at the door.

" We are sorry to have kept you waiting," said Mother as politely. " Have the bees promised not to bite holes in the flowers ? "

" Yes And now we are going to ask the same thing of the humble bees. They live in this bank."

She flew down to a low bank, and disappeared through a hole in the earth.

But the family never reached the humble bees' nest, for on top of the bank a terrific fight was going on between two digging wasps, and Twin must stop to watch it.

"Do let us see who wins," he begged; so they all poised themselves on clover leaves and folded their wings and watched the fight. A great spider lay as if dead on a little track near.

"The fight is evidently for her," said Father

The wasps circled round each other, trying to sting; they seized each other and rolled over and over on the ground, clawing and biting and pinching; they sprang apart and glared at one another.

"She is mine! I caught her!" snarled one.

"I saw her first, and I am going to have her!" shrieked the other. And with that they sprang at one another again, more furiously than ever.

"What tigers they are!" sighed Mother, who hated battles.

One of the struggling wasps twisted herself suddenly and found a soft spot in her enemy's body. With a cry of triumph she drove in her fatal sting, then jumped away. The stabbed and dying creature rose and crawled slowly away into the grass without one backward look; but the victor darted to the spider, seized it and began to drag it along the bank. It was bigger than herself, yet she pulled it along very quickly.

"You must be very strong," said Mother.

"One has to be strong to get food for one's babies," said the wasp. She gave Mother a suspicious look. "You are not after my spider too, are you?" she asked.

"My babies don't eat spiders," said Mother. "May we come and see you feed yours?"

"Oh, there are no babies yet," said the wasp "I am only getting ready for them."

The twins looked at her in astonishment.

"Do you kill the food before the babies are born?" asked Twin.

"I don't kill them. She is not dead, only stupefied. I provide my babies with fresh meat."

"How is it done?" asked Father.

But the wasp was tugging very impatiently at the spider.

"I can't stay here talking all day," she said. "I have to get this great creature home. If you want to see what I do, you may come too, since you are evidently fairies; but for goodness' sake don't hinder me!"

She hauled the spider along while she talked, and the family had to fly close overhead to hear what she was saying. The way was rough; she had to drag her heavy load over hills and through thickets; sometimes she had to get behind and push, or roll it down a slope; but at last her burrow was reached.

She pushed the spider in before her and rammed it against the end of the burrow. Then she turned and laid an egg on it. Now she came out, rolled some loose earth into the burrow, and plastered it with her jaws into a wall in front of the spider.

"There!" she said happily. "When the baby hatches he can feed on the fresh meat of her body till he is strong enough to break down the wall and come out."

"How did you catch her?" asked Father.

The wasp chuckled.

"I was just in time!" she said. "She was opening her door when I sprang on her. If once she had got in I should never have caught her, for she can hold her door shut so tightly that no one can open it. But I want to lay another egg, so I must go hunting again." She flew away.

"How cruel she is!" said Win. "The poor spider!"

"Oh, well, it is for her baby," said Mother. "Babies must be fed, you know, and after all, spiders kill flies."

"And men kill cows and sheep for food," said Father.

"And pigs and hens and ducks and turkeys," Twin added.

"But the spider is not killed! She will be eaten alive," cried Win.

"But perhaps she will never feel anything again," said Mother. "I think she will never awaken again. She seems paralysed. The wasp spoke of a door, so there must be a house," she went on. "Perhaps it was a trap-door spider. Perhaps there are eggs left behind, with no one to take care of them. I should like to find that door."

They all set off, flying in the direction from which the wasp had brought the spider. They passed the place where the fight had been, followed the trail of the dragged spider a little farther, and came at last to a round, flat door hanging slightly open in the face of the bank. It was as big as a sixpenny-piece, and made of woven silk, covered on the outside with grains of earth to make it look like the rest of the bank.

CHAPTER V

BABIES HERE AND THERE

MOTHER opened the door widely, and they all looked in. A long tube-shaped house of silk led into the bank, but it was empty.

"I wonder whether anyone has taken the eggs!" said Mother.

"There were none."

The voice came from half-way down the bank. A black beetle sat on a little ledge, almost hidden under a tuft of grass.

"The spider had just finished her house, and had not yet laid her eggs," said the beetle. "She had been out visiting, and two wasps saw her as she came back. One sprang on her as she reached the door, but the other dashed after her as she was carried off. I could see there was going to be a fight. Who got her in the end?"

"The one who sprang on her," said Mother.

Win had been thinking about beetles. "Are you sure you didn't go into the house and eat the eggs?" she asked.

The beetle looked hurt. "I tell you there were no eggs!" she said. "Besides, nothing would tempt me to leave my own eggs, with so many enemies about."

"Your own eggs! Where are they?" asked Win eagerly.

"I am sitting on them."

"Oh, is that why you sit so close to the ground? Please let me see them."

"Certainly not!" snapped the beetle. "Nobody shall see them till they are hatched."

"Why not?"

"They are safe under me," the beetle said sharply.

Now it was Win who looked hurt.

"I wouldn't harm them for the world!" she cried.

The beetle turned the subject a little. "Look at that spider at the bottom of the bank!" she said. "She thinks she is a wonderfully careful mother because she carries her eggs about with her like that, instead of leaving them in dark corners as some spiders do; but I say my way is the best of all. It is warmer and safer."

The spider at the bottom of the bank carried her eggs under her body, in a round bag as white as a little snowball. She was moving slowly and quietly along, evidently hunting.

"That must be a heavy load to carry all day!" said Mother, "but I suppose she loves her load, because it is full of her babies."

"But her enemies can see it," said the beetle. "Now mine are hidden——"

She never finished, for at that moment there was a rumble, and a great stone came crashing down from the top of the bank.

"Wings are useful!" said Father, as they all flew up out of the way.

The beetle sat still: even danger would not frighten her off her eggs. The stone slipped past

without touching her. "That is a good thing!" was all she said.

But down at the bottom of the bank the spider lay crushed under the edge of the stone.

"Her egg-bag is not crushed," said Mother. "I can see it there still."

She and Win flew down. The egg-bag had been missed by the edge of the stone; it lay loose from the poor dead mother. Win picked it up.

"I will take care of it till the little ones come out," she said.

She carried it in her arms. It was a big bag for such a tiny fairy.

"Mother! Win! Come quickly!" called Father's voice from the top of the bank. Mother and Win flew up.

"Babies! Hundreds of them!" cried Father. "Look at the little nurses carrying them."

The slip of the stone had uncovered an ant's fresh-air roof. Here in the early morning the babies had been brought for light and air, with the over-arching stone as a veranda. Now the stone had suddenly gone, and the full glare of the sun beat down on the soft white babies. Nurse-ants seized the nearest babies and rushed below with them into the passages, and workers from every side poured out to help. They carried the legless, helpless, fat little babies in their jaws, and ran off with astonishing quickness. Indeed, Mother and Win had hardly time to understand what was happening before the last one had disappeared, and the ground was as bare as if it had never been an open-air roof for hundreds of babies.

" Quick work, that ! "

Everybody looked round. " Oh, it is a Daddy Longlegs," said Twin. " Good-day, Daddy Longlegs ! " he called.

" Then you are not fairies after all ! " was the sharp reply.

" Yes, we are. Why not ? " asked Twin.

" If you are fairies, you would know that I am *Lady* Longlegs. You would never call me Daddy. Daddy, indeed ! "

Twin turned red and uncomfortable. Father took off his little scarlet hat and bowed low to the angry lady.

" Twin is sorry for his mistake, I know," he said. " You see, we are very new fairies, and we have much to learn. Will you tell us the difference between you and Daddy Longlegs ? "

" Why, it is so easy ! " she cried. " Daddy has no egg-placer. Can't you see my egg-placer ? " She turned her back and pointed a sharp prong at them. " Daddy can't do this," she said, and she stood straight up on two long black legs with the other four in the air, pricked a hole in the grass roots with the prong, rolled something into the hole, and covered it up with earth. " There ! " she said. " No Daddy can do that."

Win and Twin stood as close to her as they could without treading on her toes—those legs of hers were really very long !

" But what was it ? " asked Twin. " You were so quick. What did you bury in the hole ? "

" An egg, of course ! " she replied. " I laid it as you came up."

"But why did you bury it?" asked Win. "Is it dead?"

"Dead! Of course not. Oh, you must be *very* new fairies not to know that I always put my eggs in the ground to hatch."

"I told you we were very new," said Father.

"But how can you watch the little baby?" asked Win.

"I don't watch it," replied Lady Longlegs.

"Then something might eat it," cried Win. "There are all sorts of things in the ground—spiders and grubs and——" She was going to say beetles, but she remembered that the black beetle down the bank was sure to be listening, so she stopped.

Lady Longlegs laughed.

"I wasn't eaten," she said, "and yet I came out of the ground. I was one of the grubs, you see; and I had such a tough skin that no one could eat me. That is what each of my babies will have, a tough, leathery skin that will keep them safe. 'Little Leather-jackets,' my babies are called. No need to watch them. I pop the eggs in the ground, and off I go."

"Do you never see them again?" asked Twin.

"Never. Why should I? They are quite able to take care of themselves And I always put them where there are plenty of grass roots to eat."

"But it seems so strange that you should never see your own children," said Win. "Don't you want to?"

"What is the use of wanting to do a thing you can't do?" asked the Lady. "My babies can't live above the ground

so how are we to see one another? And by the time they come out I shall be dead."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Win.

"It is nothing to sigh about," said the Lady. "Many mothers never see their children. There is one up there who won't." She pointed with a feeler into the shadow of a little bush.

The twins peered in. On the underside of a leaf a gold and purple butterfly was poised; her beautiful wings were folded high above her back, and with the fine tip of her long curved body she was laying tiny eggs on the leaf, row after row, dainty and fine as fairy sand.

"I shall not see my babies," said the butterfly, "but I put them where their food lies all about them when they hatch."

"So do I. So do I. Under the water my babies live."

It was a dragon-fly sailing overhead; she had heard the butterfly's words.

"Under the water! Come and see," she called; and the family flew after her at once. She was a beauty, gay in green and gold, and beaming at the twins through great bronze eyes. "Come to the river," she said. They all flew high across the land.

"This spider-bag grows heavier and heavier," said Win. "I can't carry it much longer."

"Here is the Cradle Ship," said Mother. "Hide it in that."

Win flew down and hid the bag among the pillows at the end of the ship. "Now I can fly faster," she said, as she came up.

"Those egg-bags are always a nuisance," said the

dragon-fly. "The mothers are silly to make them. Who could fly with a heavy thing like that hanging to one?"

"But spiders don't fly," said Mother.

"And the dragon-fly couldn't make a bag if she tried," whispered Father in Win's ear; "she has no silk in her body."

CHAPTER VI

MOTHERS

THEY came to the sunlit river, flowing smoothly down to the sea. Round a little bend there was a quiet spot where rushes and river reeds grew in the shallow water, and bright green frogs sat on tiny islands.

"This is a good place," said the dragon-fly "There will be tender tadpoles for my babies to eat."

She settled on a weed, and walked down its stem until she almost reached the water.

"Now watch!" she said, and the family crowded round her. She opened her tail and pushed out a little pointed weapon, sharp as a sword. "It is my egg-placer," she said. She turned it towards the stem, raised her wings high out of the way, curved her body down until its end was under the water, and drove the egg-placer sharply into the weed.

"That is how I make the hole," she said. "Would you like to see the egg?"

"Yes, please!" cried the twins.

She climbed the stem, the egg-placer opened, and down its glistening centre slid the beautiful egg. She lowered the egg-placer to the hole she had made, and dropped the egg gently in.

"There!" she said. "That is a safe hiding-place for him When he hatches, he will creep down the

stem and live in the water, where there is plenty of food to be caught—tadpoles and tiny fishes and other river creatures. Then some day he will crawl up a reed into the air and cast off his old grey skin and spread his new wide wings and sail away across the land as a glittering dragon-fly."

"Splendid!" cried Father.

But the dragon-fly was gone. She had flown to another weed, to stab another hole and lay another egg.

"Look!" cried Twin. "What are those?"

In the water hundreds of little brown creatures were swimming to the surface. As each came up he shot out of his worm-like skin and sped away into the air, a slender little green fly with four lace-like wings and three long whisks in his tail.

"Mayflies!" said Mother.

The family watched. In a few minutes each fly returned, settled on a reed, threw off another skin, and rose again, grey this time instead of green, and with wings finer and more lacy than ever and tail whisks longer. Then up he soared, to dance with the others in the air. More and more shot up, till there were hundreds, thousands, flitting to and fro above the pool.

"Let us see what they are doing," said Mother.

The family flew to the little cloud of whirling flies.

"Is it a game?" asked Mother

"It is our wedding dance," they said in their tiny voices; "our happy wedding dance. Three years we lived in the mud below the stream, but now our beautiful wings have grown and our wedding dance

has come. ' Up and down, and in and out, and drop the babies gently,' " they sang; " ' drop the babies gently.' "

Every now and then one of them would fly lower than the others, skim the water for a moment, and rise again to the dance.

" I believe they are the mothers dropping babies," said Win.

They all flew down to watch. Win was right. As each fly touched the stream she left behind a cluster of tiny eggs. For a moment the cluster floated like a little boat; then it parted, and each egg sank slowly through the water to the soft mud floor.

" They will hatch there," said Mother.

Presently a fly here and there began to drop from the dance to the reeds or the top of the water. Where they dropped, there they lay still, making no answer when the twins spoke to them.

" They are dead," said a passing ant. She stopped to look at them. " Just a merry hour for dancing, while the fathers give the baby-grains and the mothers lay the eggs; then all is over. No time even for eating."

" It seems dreadful," said Win sadly.

" Yet down in the mud they have lived for two or three years. That is a fairly long life for an insect," said the ant. " I myself may not live any longer."

The twins looked at her and wondered how she could live at all, with a waist so tiny. Yet she had wise eyes.

" May we see your houses under the ground? " asked Mother.

"And your little white babies?" asked Win.

"Certainly, certainly," said the ant. "Follow me."

She led the way, and they all walked down a long passage into the ground. There through the ants' city they went, tunnel after tunnel, little round room after little round room, until it seemed that they would never come to an end of it. And everywhere there were busy ants to be seen—ants licking the eggs to keep them clean, just as a cat licks her kittens; ants feeding the soft white babies; ants carrying babies up to the air or down to a darker room; ants milking green-fly cows; ants cleaning the rooms or cleaning themselves; ants helping young ants out from their silky cocoons and straightening their new bent legs.

"I never saw busier folk," said Father.

"I must be busy too," said their leader. "I have brought food for the Queen."

"Where is the food?" asked Twin, looking the ant all over.

"In my crop," she replied.

She hurried to the Queen, who raised her head at once and gently stroked the worker's face with her feelers. "What have you brought me?" she asked.

"Honey and honey-dew," said the worker. She opened her mouth and the sweet food came trickling out on her tongue. As fast as it came, the Queen licked it off.

"That is all," said the worker at last.

"Thank you. It was very good," said the Queen. She turned and walked away, dropping a tiny white egg on the ground as she went. The worker picked

it up in her jaws and carried it away to one of the rooms and laid it beside the other eggs.

The family followed, to see what she did with it.

"What a strange mother!" cried Win. "Dropping her eggs just anywhere, and leaving you to pick them up!"

"Lazy, I call her," said Twin. "Fancy having to be fed like a baby!"

Every bristle of the ant's body stood on end with anger. Her eyes glared.

"If you were not flower-fairies I would sting you," she cried. "The idea of calling our Queen lazy! After all she has done! How dare you?"

"The children don't understand," said Mother gently. "They are such new little fairies Won't you tell them about the Queen?"

The ant began to look a little less angry.

"Oh, well, if they don't know, perhaps they are to be excused," she said; "but no mother in the world has done more for her children than our Queen. I will tell you all about it. When she first came out of her cocoon she had wings, four beautiful wings; though we workers have none. She could fly up into the clear bright air. Yet when the time was coming for her to lay her eggs she tore off her beautiful wings! Yes, she tore them all off and gave up her splendid flying life for the sake of her babies, who must live under the ground where wings would only be in the way! Then she burrowed this first great tunnel, all by herself—for none of us had yet been born to help her. See how high and long it is, and think of one little lonely mother digging out all that earth and carrying it away!

" She closed up the outside end for fear of enemies, and never again came out. Down in the lower end, where she had made a little room, she laid her precious eggs, and there she guarded them. They took long to hatch, but never once did she leave them, never once did she go above to feed or to see the light. And when the hungry babies came out of their egg-skins, she fed them from the juices of her own mouth, as you saw me feed her a few minutes ago. For six long months she had no food, yet fed her babies from her own body, watched them as eggs and grubs and chrysalids, helped them out of their cocoons, and at last led them to the closed door of the tunnel. ' Break through,' she said, ' and gather food.' And they opened up the mouth of the tunnel and found food and brought some to her. ' Dear mother,' they said, ' you who have loved us and starved yourself for us, let us help you now. We will dig the tunnels and take care of the eggs and the babies. You shall rest and be fed and do nothing but lay the eggs.' And so we all work for our Queen, for every fresh baby who comes out of the cocoon is told the story of her wonderful love."

The twins' eyes were shining.

" I am sorry I called her lazy," said Twin.

" No wonder you bring her food," said Win.

CHAPTER VII

WATER FAIRIES

"I MUST write some verses," said Father, as they came out on the river bank again. "Bits of them have been buzzing about in my head; I must put them together."

He sat high on a reed, hung his hat on its tip, and took out his notebook and pencil.

"We must be quiet while Father writes," said Mother. She sat on a clover leaf and nursed the baby, while Win and Twin played see-saw on a dry grass stem that had fallen across a stick.

Father was not long; it was really wonderful how quickly he could make poetry.

"Finished!" he cried, and he read the verses out:

"I peeped among the bushes, looked within the flowers—
A hundred babies blinked their eyes at me.
A hundred hundred hid where the leaves made shady bowers;
I could not count the number I could see.

"I peeped beneath the ground, I wandered through its caves,
A thousand babies lay and crept and ate.
A thousand thousand live where the darkness hides and saves;
The earth was full, their number was so great.

" I peeped below the water, watched each shining
pool—
A million babies darted low in play.
A million million swim where their homes lie wet
and cool;
The number there no man might truly say

" I asked the babies small: ' Why are you all about?
How can so many live below, above? '
They jumped and answered fast, in a sudden baby
shout,
' Because of mothers and of mother love.

" ' By mothers we are fed; they guard our helpless
days,
They weave and watch and drive the prowlers
out;
No tongue can tell the tale of their anxious, loving
ways!
Because of mothers we are all about.' "

" Look at all those fish in the river! " said Twin suddenly.

Father snatched up his hat.

" Salmon! " he cried. " Come on, everyone. They are going to lay their eggs."

In a moment the family was flying over the river They soon overtook the first pair of salmon, flying so close to them that they could hear what was said.

" We are the first. We must have the best place," said the mother-fish.

" Of course! Or else there will be more fighting for me to do," said the father. His great bent jaw looked as if he could fight.

"A clean, gravelly place," went on the mother-fish, "with no mud to choke the babies."

"A shallow pool where no big fish lives that might eat them," said he.

Up the river they went, and still up; it grew narrower, and presently waterfalls barred the way. Down the faces of great rocks the water came tumbling fast, to fall in a foaming pool at the foot.

"The poor fish! They can never swim up those rocks," said Win. "They will have to go back again to the sea."

"Wait!" said Father. "Come up here."

The family hung above the waterfalls to watch. The fish swam close to the pool.

"A big leap!" said the father-fish. "Can you manage it?"

"I think so," said the mother.

With a great sweep of her fins she sprang up through the tumbling water high into the air. Splash! She did not reach the top of the rocks, but fell back at their feet. Again she leapt; this time she cleared the rocks. Up came the father beside her in splendid style, and forward they dashed against the downward-hurrying waters.

Behind them came the shoal, flashing like streaks of gold and silver against the whiteness of the falls. Some fell, and leaped again and yet again to reach the top; some cleared it at a bound, following fast upon the leading pair.

The stream grew narrower still, and shallower. With careful eyes the parents watched the floor, pausing here and there, and swimming to and fro, till at last they found a place they liked.

"This will do," the mother said.

"Yes," said the father. "We shall find nothing better."

They lay resting in their clear gravelly pool.

"That was a good swim!" said the father.

The shoal came up, some settling here and there in pairs, some passing the first two, but none daring to enter their pool.

The family waited and watched; but nothing happened.

"This is very slow," said Father.

Mother flew close to the water.

"Will you please tell us what you are going to do next?" she asked the fish.

"Rest," said the father.

"And after that?"

"Rest," said the mother.

Mother smiled.

"And after *that?*" she asked.

"You seem inquisitive," said the salmon-mother.

"It is for my little ones. They would like to know about your dear babies."

"Oh, well, if that is so I don't mind telling you. I shall lay my eggs in the gravel."

"And I shall lay my little grains over the eggs," said the father. "And the grains will join with the eggs to make thousands of babies."

"And will you stay here to watch over them and feed them?" asked Mother.

"No, indeed. Long before they are hatched we shall be back in the sea."

"They need no guarding here," said the father. "That is why we came so far up."

"As for feeding them," said the mother, "we couldn't do that, for at first they have no mouths."

The twins stared at that.

"Then how do you keep them alive?" asked Win.

"The egg does it. When each baby is hatched he has a bag of egg-food, bigger than himself, fixed on his breast."

"How heavy for him!" cried Win, remembering the egg-bag of the spider.

"Not at all," said the mother-fish; "it is he who is heavy. The food-bag is so light that it floats in the water, and he has to hang below it, upside down."

"He must look funny," said Twin "I wish I could see him."

"He isn't even laid yet," said the fish.

"He will grow bigger and bigger and the food-bag will grow smaller and smaller," she went on, "until at the end of six weeks there will be no food-bag left. But by that time the baby will have fins and a mouth, and will be able to swim away and catch his meals in the stream." She turned over on her side. "I have told you all about it," she said.

"Thank you," said Mother.

"It is no use waiting to see the eggs," said the fish. "They are not ready yet."

"Then we had better go back," said Mother. "How would you like to be water-fairies and slide down the waterfall?" she asked the twins.

"Oh, splendid!" cried the twins. They clapped their fairy hands and flew so close to Mother that they banged into her.

"Steady! steady!" she smiled. "Don't bump Baby, please. Hang still in the air for a moment. Quite still." The wonderful look came into her eyes. 'Water-fairy!" she said, touching each in turn; next moment they all slipped into the water and went floating gaily down the stream.

They were shining little creatures now, dressed in gold-and-silver scales, and no bigger than a minnow. Their wings were shaped like fins, and on their tiny wrists and ankles grew still smaller fins, like jewelled fans. They splashed and laughed as they went, and Father chased the twins to the very edge of the waterfall. There they took hands, and down they went sliding with the sliding water, diving into the great pool at the bottom, and coming up to the top again far down the stream, still hand in hand, and shouting with delight. Even Baby was smiling. He was the dearest little water-fairy that ever was, tucking himself away under Mother's left arm and peeping out at the twins with roguish eyes, as if he understood and enjoyed the fun, though as yet he could not talk about it.

"Let us go down to the sea," said Mother.

"The sea! Yes, down to the sea!" cried Twin.

Win looked doubtful.

"We don't want to leave Babyland yet, do we, Mother?"

"Oh, no," said Mother. "I don't mean that. We shall not go far out to sea. But along the shore there may be rock pools where the sea-mothers leave their eggs. We may find many babies there."

"Good!" said Father. He sang:

"Diving into the Great Pool at the bottom"

" Down to the sea, the big salt sea,
Down to the rocks and the sands go we.
Down where the gleaming sea-shells lie,
And the white sea-birds go wheeling by.

" Down to the pools where the sea-weeds sway,
And the baby fishes hide and play;
Where bright eyes peep from rock and ledge,
Till the tide comes breaking over the edge.

" Down we go to the shore and the caves,
And the white sea-horses that gallop the waves.
Down to the rocks and the sands go we,
Down to the sea, the big salt sea!"

" A fine song!" said Mother. " Where did you get it?"

" Made it up as I went along. Now was there ever such a clever father before?"

" Please sing it again," begged the twins.

He sang it again, and they all joined in and went singing down to the sea.

From the mouth of the river they turned aside into a little bay. Here were the rocks and sands, and the pools with the tide just beginning to break over the edge. They swam round a rock and startled a crowd of crabs who were pulling at something dark lying in the wet sand. The funny grey creatures scuttled off sideways, all but one. She lay still and flat.

" I believe she is pretending to be dead," said Twin. " If she is frightened, why doesn't she run like the others?"

" We are not going to hurt you," said Win to the crab. But she lay as still as ever.

" We'll turn her over on her back and see what she will do then," said Father.

They turned her over. " Oh, look ! " cried Win. Under the crab's body were hundreds of beautiful little balls, red as holly berries and as small as grains of sand. They were stuck closely together under her bent tail, and her legs were doubled over them to keep them safe.

" Her eggs ! " said Mother. " Poor thing ! That is why she did not run. She used her legs to cover her eggs from harm. But we wouldn't hurt them. How bright and beautiful they are ! "

CHAPTER VIII

THE FISH BABY

THE crab stretched out a leg.

"How was I to know you wouldn't hurt them?" she asked. "Turn me over, please. It is most unpleasant lying on my back like this."

They turned her over, and she looked at them sharply with her little stalked eyes.

"You gave me an awful fright!" she said. "My eggs are so heavy that I can't run as fast as the others, so I thought it best to keep quite still and pretend to be a stone. My back looks rather like one, I am told. But I see you are fairies, so it was no use pretending to you."

"I am sorry we frightened you," said Mother "Do you carry your eggs about with you always?"

"Until they hatch," said the crab.

"What then?" asked Win.

"Why, then the little ones can swim and look after themselves. You would never expect them to grow into crabs, they are so unlike me at first," she said proudly. "I had some last year, and I hardly knew them myself. They were round like tiny barrels, with a long spike standing up and another hanging down between their eyes; and the funniest forked tail you ever saw. And they were as transparent as water."

"How queer!" said Twin.

"Not queer at all when you think how it helps them to escape from greedy fishes," said the crab. "The fishes look through them, and don't see that they are there."

"They are fairies. They won't hurt us," a peeping crab called to the others. Back they all scuttled to their feast. They began at once to scrape with their claws and pull with their nippers, trying to make a hole in something.

"It is dreadfully tough," said one.

"What is it?" asked Twin.

The family peered between the busy crabs. They saw a brown oblong case, like a thin tough purse. Along the middle it was puffed out as if something lay inside, but the edges were fastened so firmly together that the crabs could not tear them open. Three corners had each a curly tendril for a mooring rope, but at the fourth corner the tendril was torn away.

"It is a dog-fish's egg," said Father.

"An egg!" cried Mother. "Oh, don't let the crabs break it. There may be a baby inside."

At that very moment one of the crabs tore the side of the case. Mother sprang in among them.

"Stand back!" she said; and because the wonderful look was in her eyes the crabs scuttled off the case and stood round it in a ring. But they grumbled.

"We found it. It is ours."

Mother lifted the torn flap and looked in.

"There is a baby," she said.

Father and the twins stepped on to the case to look. The baby fish lay staring up at them with frightened round eyes.

"I am not ready to come out yet," he said in a baby voice. "See, my food-bag is not empty!" He moved and showed them his white food-bag, hanging to his breast by a little cord.

"Poor baby!" said Mother; "your pretty case is torn, and if we leave you here the crabs will eat you."

"Oh dear!" sighed the little fish, "what shall I do? I really can't swim about yet. Look at my fins; they are not finished."

"We must hide you in some safe place," said Mother. "Help me to carry him," she said to the others.

They lifted him out and carried him through the ring of crabs, Mother at the head, Father in the middle, and the twins at the tail. Although he was but a baby, he was bigger than any of them, and he was heavy.

"We found him. He is ours," grumbled the crabs; but they dared not try to take him.

"You may have his case," said Mother, and the family swam off with their rescued baby.

Mother looked through a narrow passage into a pool lying between a cluster of rocks. "That might be a safe place," she said. "Let us go in and see."

They swam through the passage. The pool was beautiful. Green sea-lettuce grew here and there in tufts on its glistening floor, and the edges of the rocks were gay with glorious starry flowers, as big and as red as dahlias.

"This is a lovely place for him," said Win. "He can lie under the rocks among those pretty red flowers."

"Flowers indeed!" cried a scornful voice above

them. "You make a great mistake if you think those are flowers."

They looked up. On the side of one of the rocks, just above the water, a sea-snail was sitting, poking her little horned head from under her shell to gaze down at them.

"Flowers indeed!" she said again. "Why, those are sea-anemones. Look at that one over there."

They looked. A tiny gold-barred fish had come out to see the fairies, and in his excitement had hovered too close to one of the great red stars. It had seized him; its lovely red arms were closing over him, and he was already disappearing from sight in its open mouth.

"Oh, dear!" cried Win.

"Animals, not flowers!" said the sea-snail; "and dangerous neighbours, I can tell you. I keep away from anemones, and I take care to lay my eggs far away from them too. They would soon have your baby fish."

"Then we shall not leave him here," said Mother. "You spoke of your eggs; may we see them?" she asked.

The sea-snail slowly moved a little higher up the rock. Where she had been sitting rings of jelly-ribbon were left, coiled in their edges round and round. So light and delicate they were, so softly pink, so beautiful, that when the rising water lifted them they might well have been fairy chiffon fluted on the rock.

"My eggs!" said the sea-snail proudly.

The family looked closely at the pretty coil. In the clear jelly were set thousands of thousands

of white eggs, so tiny that none but fairy eyes could see them.

"What a crowd!" said Twin. "When they hatch out the pool will be quite filled with sea-snails. All the rocks will be covered. There will be no room for anything else."

"All will not live," said the snail. "I do my best for them; I place them where both air and water can reach them, and I set them in jelly that will slip aside from the gasping mouths of fishes; but they have many enemies, both now and after they are hatched. That is why there must be so many eggs, that some may be left in the end."

"They are very beautiful," said Mother.

"So are mine," said one of the anemones. She opened her soft red mouth, and from it floated out a shoal of anemone babies, quick, slender, graceful little creatures, flashing in an instant to the farther edge of the pool.

The family rushed after them, but a sudden wave swept everybody over a low rock into a bigger pool, and the anemones were carried by the water out of sight.

The new pool was wide and long, and bright with seaweed of all shades.

"I wonder if we can find a safe place here for our fish-baby," Mother said. They swam close to the rocks and peered into holes and corners.

"Oh, dear, dear, dear! What a dangerous world it is! We nearly lost you that time, Skippy. Now, children, *do* listen to what I tell you. Keep close to me, and follow me wherever I go. If you wander the least little way, you are sure to be eaten by something."

The voice was so small that even the fairies could hardly hear it. They stared into the corner from which it came. A mother cup-shrimp was swimming round and round her shoal of tiny babies, talking anxiously to them the whole time.

"You are so little," she said. "You cannot take care of yourselves yet. I will guard you and find food for you, but you must keep close to me. How can I take care of you if you all go swimming different ways? Keep close to me, and you will be safe."

She swam out from the corner, and the babies remembered this time to keep close to her. There were twenty of them, tiny half-transparent creatures, following their mother like a brood of chickens following a hen. She looked back at them to see that no enemy was near, and off they all hurried to find a meal.

Under a ledge a whelk looked out from two small eyes set at the foot of her horns. Her pale-pink silky body was half out of her twisted shell, and she had been busy, for beside her stood a cone of tough round cases stuck one upon another, each holding hundreds of tiny eggs.

"Did you lay all those yourself?" asked Mother.

"Laid them all myself, made the cases myself, stuck them on the rock myself. This seems a safe corner for eggs."

"Ah!" said Mother. "I wonder whether we should leave the baby fish here!"

"Do!" said the whelk, and she eyed the fish so greedily that the fairies swam off with him at once.

" No doubt she would like us to leave him there," said Mother, " but I can see it would never do."

" I am so tired of being pulled along," said the fish. " I want to rest."

" Yet we dare not leave you here," said Mother.

She looked thoughtfully at a broad flap of kelp that hung from its stem.

" I see a way," she said.

She touched the piece of kelp with her fairy hand. ' Open ! " she said, " and make a bed for the baby fish."

The flap at once split into an upper and a lower sheet. The fairies laid the fish between the sheets, and he nestled thankfully.

" That feels better," he said.

" You will be closed in," said Mother, " and the waves will rock you to and fro. When you are ready you can nibble your way out with your sharp teeth."

" Yes," he said, " I will nibble my way out."

" Be fastened together ! " said Mother to the flap of kelp ; and the split edges joined together, showing only a hump where the baby lay

" Good-bye ! " called the twins.

" Good-bye ! " called the baby. ' It is splendid in here."

" Are you hiding eggs in there ? " It was a violet-shell who asked the question. She came swimming up behind them.

" No, not eggs," said Mother. " Oh, what a beautiful float ! What is it for ? "

" It is my egg-raft," said the violet-shell.

It was clear as jelly, and light with air-bubbles,

and it was fastened by a cord to the violet-shell so that she pulled it behind her as she swam.

"Where are the eggs?" asked Win.

"I can see them," said Twin. "Look below."

Rows of little cases hung under the float.

"My eggs are in those," said the violet-shell.

"Are you going to leave them here in the pool?" asked Mother.

"No, indeed! They go with me till each is ready to swim off by itself. I shall not be staying here. I came in with the last wave, and I suppose I shall go out with the next."

"Do you mean to say you let the waves take you wherever they like?" asked Father.

"I can't help it," said the violet-shell. "I am so light that I can't sink, so I must always drift with the waves." As she spoke the next wave came and carried her off, raft and all.

Twin swam to the edge of the pool to watch her out of sight.

"Come here! Oh, come!" he called to the others. "The loveliest shell you ever saw! And big!"

They all swam out to see. Moving slowly towards them through the water, as if pushed from behind, was a great shining snow-white shell, ribbed and decorated with hundreds of pointed knobs, and curved high at the prow like a fairy ship.

"It is an argonaut," said Father.

On it came, and now they could see that it was indeed pushed from behind. The long arms of the argonaut, and most of her body, were stretched from the back of the shell, and her squirting-tube

shot water out to move it along. With her two great eyes she glared at the twins.

"How ugly she is!" whispered Twin.

"Not half good enough for such a lovely shell," Win whispered back.

"Stupid place this!" grumbled the argonaut.

"Then why did you come?" asked Twin. He was not going to be afraid of her, though she did look so fierce!

"A horrid current caught me at the corner of the bay," she said crossly. "I was washed in and nearly stranded on the beach. I saw this passage, though, just in time to save the cradle."

"The cradle!" cried Win. "Is your shell a cradle?"

"Of course it is. If it hadn't been, I should have left it at once; but what mother would leave her eggs to be dashed on the rocks?"

It was wonderful how her ugliness left her when she spoke of her eggs. Her eyes grew so gentle that she hardly looked like the same creature.

"Please let us peep into your beautiful cradle and see your eggs," Win begged.

The argonaut lifted a web-like arm from the shell. The eggs were clustered like grapes in the curving prow. She covered them again, stretching the arm half over the outside of the shell.

"When they hatch, the cradle is their safe hiding-place till they are big enough to leave it and fish for themselves," she said. "But I can't stay here. This pool is too shallow for the cradle. I must somehow return to the open sea, or I shall certainly be stranded."

"We will help you," said Mother. She and Father took hold of opposite sides of the shell, and Win and Twin fell in behind them. "We will guide your cradle ship while you push from behind," said Mother.

The fairies guided, and pushed with their fairy power, and the argonaut pushed with her squirts of water, and in a moment the cradle was floating out towards the open sea.

"How do you make such a beautiful shell?" asked Win as they went.

"How did you make your beautiful hair?" asked the argonaut. She was most friendly now.

"Oh, that! It just grew," said Win.

"So did my shell. A kind of juice that hardens in the sea came out of my web-arms, and that grew into the shell. It began when I was quite little, and it went on growing till I was big enough to lay my eggs. But it isn't stuck on; I can swim away from it. Is your hair stuck on?"

"Stuck on," said Win. "Hard!"

"Does the father argonaut grow a shell?" asked Twin.

"No, indeed! He has neither eggs nor babies to mind. Why should he have a cradle, the lazy little creature?"

"Little? Is he little?" asked Twin.

"Of course he is! Why, I could eat him up and never know I had him, he is so little."

"Is this water deep enough?" asked Father.

"Yes, thank you," said the argonaut; "and the current is not too strong here. Good-bye!"

Off went the lovely cradle through the water; the

big round eyes of the mother staring from behind as she squirted and pushed.

"Funny things, babies!" said a voice. "Sometimes the mothers have to do all the work, sometimes the fathers."

The family looked everywhere to find out who was speaking.

"Why, I believe it is a pipe-fish," said Mother. "I thought you were a bit of seaweed" she said to the pipe-fish.

"So did I," said Father.

"So did I," said Win.

"So did I," said Twin.

"So does everybody," said the pipe-fish; "and a very good thing too. That is how I cheat my enemies. But I didn't know I could cheat fairies!"

No wonder everybody mistook him for a bit of seaweed: he was long and strangely thin, and just the green-brown colour of the sea-grass all round him. He hung upright among their blades, too, which made him all the more like one of them.

"We have seen the mothers taking care of the babies," said Win, "but not the fathers."

"You see a father doing it now," said he.

The twins stared at him. "You?" they asked

"Yes, me!"

"Where are your babies?" asked Twin.

The pipe-fish moved higher in the water to show them a little pouch in the skin under his body.

"My baby-bag," he said. "It is full of eggs I have to take care of them until they hatch"

"And what then?" asked Win.

"Oh, then they will swim off and take care of themselves."

"Where is their mother?"

"I don't know. Along the shore somewhere. She laid the eggs in my bag and said, 'Look after them,' and then she swam away."

"Do all the pipe-fish mothers do that?" asked Twin.

"Every one of them."

The twins were very much astonished; but Mother laughed.

"It is quite a change to find a father minding the babies," she said. "I think it is only fair. I don't see why the mothers should always have it to do. Are there any more fathers that do it?" she asked.

"There's Spiny Stickleback farther along the shore. He does it, I am told. Builds a nest, too."

"A nest! A fish builds a nest!" exclaimed Twin. "Oh, do let us go to see it, Mother."

"Of course!" said Mother. And off they went.

CHAPTER IX

FAIRY BIRDS

ALONG the shore they found Spiny Stickleback. He had gathered fronds of seaweed and had twisted and glued them together in the most wonderful way, until they made a nest in the water, with a hole at each end. He was gay as a rainbow with bright colours, and his eyes shone like emeralds, and he was trying to coax a grey mother stickleback into the nest.

"See my pretty house for eggs," he said. "It is woven of fine sea-fronds and swung among the strong sea-stems. It is a safe and beautiful home for babies. Come, place your eggs in it."

"Already you have eggs in it," she said.

"But not enough! Not enough!" he said. "The other mothers did not fill it. See, I am strong; my spines are sharp. I can defend many babies."

She looked at his shining eyes and gleaming colours as he swam before her to show his spines.

"I will come," she said.

She entered the nest and laid her eggs, then swam away. Spiny Stickleback swam in to lay his little grains over the eggs.

"That will do," he said. "Now there are enough. I shall have quite a large family." He pulled the nest shut with his mouth. "I go on guard!" he

said; and he swam to and fro above his nest like a sentry keeping his post.

"Please may we see the eggs?" asked Win.

"You shall not see the eggs!" he said, staring at the family with startled eyes. He had been too busy to notice them before.

"We are fairies. We shall not hurt them," said Win.

"Nobody shall see the eggs; not even the fairies. I will spear you if you come near." His spines stood up straight and sharp.

"If the mothers come, will you spear them?" asked Twin.

"Yes, I will spear them," he said.

"Oh, dear! You are a fierce creature," said Win.

"I need to be," he said. "The sea is full of enemies. Everybody would like to eat my babies. But nobody shall. For a month I will keep watch here till the eggs come out. Then I will still keep guard, minding the children till they are old enough to take care of themselves."

"Well, you are a good father," said Mother. "Are there any more like you?"

"Up the river there are some queer father frogs who take care of the babies," said Spiny. "They are different from the ordinary frog. You will find them on the left bank, near the first clump of trees."

Up the river went the family. On the way they saw a big mussel lying on the tip of a point of land that jutted well into the stream.

"I can feel fish coming," they heard her say. "Be ready to swim out quickly when I open my shell"

" We are not fish," said Twin, who was first.

" Of course not," she said ; " but fish are coming."

It was true. Next moment a shoal of fish came round the point, leaping and playing in the sunny water.

" Now ! " said the mussel. She opened her shell widely, and out swam hundreds of tiny babies, each no bigger than the head of a pin, but each with a double shell, thin and clear.

They whirled in the water and clapped their tiny shells, and from the middle of each a long sticky thread uncoiled. On came the fish among them ; the sticky threads caught on fins or tails or gills, and the baby mussels went off with the fish up the river.

" How strange ! " said Mother. " Why did they do that ? "

" For the next three months they will live on the fish," said the mussel. " Each baby has two sharp hooks in his shell ; he will stick these into the fish's skin and so hold on. He will draw his food from the fish's body, and the fish will carry him about till he is bigger. Then he will drop to the bottom of the river and live as I do here."

She shut up her shell, and the family went on.

Near the first clump of trees they walked out of the water to the bank and found a pair of the strange frogs. The mother had just laid a long string of eggs, and the father was busily packing them round his two hind legs.

" They slide about so ! " he said. " It is so hard to make them stick ! "

" You are so clumsy ! " said the mother frog. " Be careful, or you will squeeze them too much. Pack them all on ; don't leave any behind."

The eggs were bright yellow, and big for a frog, and he looked so funny by the time he had them stuck all over his thighs that the twins couldn't help laughing out.

He shook his front foot at them, but he seemed rather amused himself.

"You mustn't laugh at a hard-working father who has to take care of a large family," he said. "You ought to respect me."

"Don't stand talking there," said his wife. "Go away into your damp hole with those eggs before the sun gets at them. Be sure you keep them moist," she called, as he hopped off. "Better come out to feed at night, when everything is cool and dewy."

"Very well!" he called back.

"What an obedient husband!" exclaimed Father.

"Well, if he is taking care of the babies he might as well do it properly," said the frog. "Three weeks he will have to carry those eggs about on his legs. Glad I'm not the one to do it."

Father was puzzled. "But I thought tadpoles lived in water!" he said. "He has gone up on the land. How will the eggs get into the water?"

"It will be all right," said the frog. "When the three weeks are up he will go down into the river, and the tadpoles will hatch and swim out from their egg-skins into the water." She hopped off.

"I wonder whether all tadpoles are minded by their fathers?" said Twin.

"No, indeed!"

It was someone in the shallow water in the edge of the river who answered. She came out of the water and hopped to Twin's feet, a great mother

toad, of a different shape and colour from most toads.

"Look at my back," she said.

Everybody looked. Dotted all over the broad, flat back were queer little lumps, almost like warts. Suddenly, while they gazed, the top of one of the lumps was lifted like the flap of a pocket, and the head and hands of a baby toad peeped out.

"Oh!" cried Twin.

And "A baby!" cried Win.

Another lid opened and another baby looked out, and then another and another. They all stared hard at the water-fairies. And the water-fairies stared back at them.

"Well, you are a surprise!" said Father.

"Didn't you know we were in here?" asked the first baby. "Splendid place to live, a pocket in our mother's skin! She carries us about and takes care of us till we are old enough to look after ourselves."

"More than seventy babies am I carrying in my skin," said the mother toad. "All our babies are *not* minded by their fathers." And before they could speak she had sprung back into the water and was out of sight, babies and all.

A jewel flashed through the air—or so it seemed to the twins. Looking more closely, they saw that the jewel was a humming-bird, blue and green and gold, brilliant as an opal.

He hovered under the drooping purple blossoms of a fuchsia tree while he thrust his long, slender beak into the flowers in search of insects and honey

Presently his mate shot by, to join him at the feast. They talked together of a nest and an egg.

"Is it there? Have you laid it?" asked the father bird.

"Yes, it is there. The sweetest, prettiest egg in all the world. How proud I am of it! How proud and glad I am!"

"I must see it," said the father.

"And I must peep again, to make sure that it is safe," she said.

Side by side they passed the family, flying back into the quiet shade of a thick bush.

"A humming-bird's nest!" cried Twin.

"Oh, Mother! And we have no wings!" cried Win. "Do give us wings. Please, Fairy-mother!"

Mother smiled down at the eager little water-fairy jumping, dancing with impatience till the scales on her sides were like quicksilver in the sun.

"Let us be birds," she said; "fairy birds! What birds do you choose?"

"Humming-birds!" chose the twins in one shout.

Mother touched them, and the wonderful look was in her eyes. "Humming-birds!" she said, and there they stood, blue and green and golden, and brilliant as an opal, and with tiny bird feet and slender beaks.

"I should like to be a golden pheasant," said Father. "He is the handsomest bird I know," and in a moment a splendid golden pheasant stood where he had been. A handsome bird he was indeed. His underbody was scarlet, and his wings were blue and green and crimson; his back and head and

curved crest were golden, and his long tail was a golden-brown.

"I shall be a dove," said Mother; and she became a snow-white dove. Baby, the tiniest and gayest of humming-birds, sat on her back, his clawed feet tangled deep in the thick feathers between her wings.

"What a fairy, fairy family we are!" Father sang. He was delighted with his beautiful colours. He flew high into the air, and the others followed him, just to try their new feathered wings. It seemed strange to have no hands, and at first they hardly knew how to manage their beaks when they spoke, but they soon learned that.

"Now for the nest!" said Win. They flew into the shady bush.

CHAPTER X

BIRD MOTHERS

Twin found the nest first. It was the smallest daintiest nest ever seen, woven of spider thread and fine hairs, wonderfully smooth and soft, and as round as the top of an eggcup. In it lay a white egg, so tiny that it seemed hardly possible for a bird to come out of it. But then, as Twin remarked, it was the tiniest bird in the world that was to come out of it.

The parent birds had left it again, so the family could see it plainly. Father and Mother perched on the boughs above it, looking down, and the twins, all excitement, hopped round it on little twigs.

"I have always wanted to see a humming-bird's nest," said Twin.

"I am going to sit in it, to see what it feels like," said Win

"Be very careful not to trample on the egg," said Mother.

"I will curl up my feet," said Win.

She flew into the nest and settled herself cosily. The pretty little cup just fitted her soft round body.

"It feels so nice," she said. "The egg is still warm."

A cry of fear made all look round. The mother bird had come back and was gazing at them in horror.

Win flew out of the nest at once.

"I am not hurting your egg," she said. "I only wanted to see what your nest was like." Before she had finished, the mother bird was in her nest, sitting closely over her egg as though to shield it from further touch, and looking round at the family with defiant eyes.

"We are fairy birds," said Mother. "We would not harm either nest or egg."

The father bird shot into the bush, called by the mother's cry. His eyes gleamed, his feathers were ruffled; he was ready to do battle against all enemies. But he too stopped and stared at the great birds in his bush, one so white, the other so brightly golden.

"We are fairy birds," said Mother again. "We have come to look at your pretty nest, not to do it any harm."

His feathers sank a little

"Why did you want to see it?" he asked.

"We have never seen a humming-bird's nest before," replied Mother. "We are quite new fairy birds, and we are going to fly among the trees to see all the nests."

The father looked happy again.

"A little farther on there is a whole forest of trees," he said, "and plenty of nests."

Mother smiled.

"Yes," she said; "I think we had better go at once. I see your little wife is still rather uncertain about us."

"You gave me such a fright!" said the wife "I am trembling yet."

"We are sorry," said Mother "We must be more careful next time," she said as they flew off.

The ground below was carpeted with grasses and wild flowers. High in the air a skylark was singing, beating his wings with joy as he rose and fell and rose again. His song was so sweet that the family hung in the air to hear it.

"Listen to his words!" said Father. "He is singing about his nest. I can make poetry about that."

"How can you make poetry now that you are a bird?" asked Twin.

"How can I help making it now that I am a bird, you mean!" said Father. "Birds make poetry all day long, and sing it."

"But I mean you can't write it now," said Twin; "you have no notebook."

"Oh, haven't I?" laughed Father. He slipped a claw under his feathers and brought out a little notebook and pencil. "Mother knew I couldn't do without these," he said

"What a fairy mother!" cried Twin.

"A fairy mother indeed!" said Father.

He dropped to the grasses and made the poetry, using his claw for a hand, and singing the lines over as he set them down. Mother and the twins flew round and round in the clear sunshine above his head, listening to the verses:

"Hear the skylark singing, singing,
As he flies up near the sky!
All the air is ringing, ringing,
With his song so sweet and high
Singing, singing,
As he flies up near the sky.

" Hear the words he's calling, calling,
Close beneath a rosy cloud ;
Through the air he's falling, falling,
While his song rings clear and loud.
Calling, calling,
Close beneath a rosy cloud.

" ' Home,' he sings, ' I'm coming, coming ;
There, where clover blossoms shine,
Where the bees are humming, humming,
Lies that cosy nest of mine.
Coming, coming,
Where the clover blossoms shine.' "

The lark had stopped singing, and was falling, falling, till he dropped like a stone into the grass.

" He has gone to his nest," said Twin. " I see the place ; let us go and find it."

They all flew to the place, but no nest was there. Leading from the spot, however, winding cunningly among the tall grasses, was a narrow bird-track worn by running feet.

" I thought so," said Father. " He would not drop too near his nest, for fear hawks should watch where it lay and kill his little ones. He drops here and runs to it under cover of the grasses."

Father followed the track, and the others flew above, following him. Presently they came to the nest. The mother bird sat on it and the father sat on the ground beside her. When the golden pheasant's head pushed through the stems, the two skylarks watched him anxiously, but made no sound.

" We are fairy birds," said Father.

"We have listened to your lovely song about your nest," said Mother from overhead; "and now we have come to ask if we may see the nest." She spoke so gently that the birds were no longer afraid.

"You may see it for a moment," said the mother; "but the eggs must not be allowed to get cold. I am sitting on them to hatch them out."

She stepped off the nest, and the fairy birds looked in. Just a hollow in the ground it was, rounded, and lined with a few dead grasses. On the grasses lay three dark mottled brown eggs.

Quickly the mother covered them again.

"I have five more days to sit," she said.

"Don't you grow weary of sitting still so long?" Mother asked.

"No," she said. "I sit and think of my precious eggs and the dear babies that are to come out of them. And their father often sits beside me for company, or takes my place while I go for food and drink, or sings to me from the sky. He is a good mate."

The father bird looked shy at being praised.

"Fathers should help at hatching time," was all he said, and he ran round the nest, pretending to hunt for worms. The family noticed that the earth had been worn bare where he had been sitting, as if he spent much time there. Bird-tracks led in many directions from the nest under the arching grasses. He was certainly a thoughtful father.

A silver bell rang out from the edge of the forest. The fairy birds looked up, startled. Again it tolled out: "*Klong! klong! klong!*" sweet and full of echoing, ringing music.

" It is the bell-bird," said the mother lark. " His mate is on her nest, and he calls to her from his feeding grounds to tell her he is near."

Again the bell-note rang out. There followed a silvery tinkle, and then a song so beautiful that the family listened in delight.

The song was followed by more tolling, and the fairy birds flew to the forest to see the singer of the lovely notes.

He was a slim, greenish-brown bird, glossy, but not bright in colour. He ran up and down the flowered branches of a rata tree, dipping his fine brush tongue into the crimson blossoms and drawing it out adrip with nectar juice. Again he swung out to the end of a branch to sing.

" What a happy, happy world ! " he sang. " What a happy, happy world ! "

" Good morning. What makes you so glad ? " asked Father.

" The sunshine, and the flowers full of honey, and the wind singing in the trees, and my pretty wife at home in her nest ; these are the things that make me glad," he sang.

" The sunshine and the flowers we can see, and the wind in the trees we can hear," said Mother ; " but where is your pretty wife in her nest ? "

" Come and see ! " he said.

They followed him into the branches of a tall tree. As he flew he did not sing, but went silently, with watchful eyes.

" One never knows when an owl may be about in these shady places," he said. " No owl must find the nest."

Presently he stopped. Above them hung a beautifully built nest of twigs and grasses, firmly woven to the boughs. Over the edge of the nest an angry head looked down at them

"*Peng! Peng! Peng!*" It was the bell-bird mother. "*Peng! Peng! Peng!* Go away! Go away!"

"Sweetest, they are not to be feared. They are plainly fairy birds," said the bell-bird father.

"*Peng! Peng! Peng!*" she cried still. "I don't care if they are fairy birds. You ought to know better than to bring anyone near the nest."

"We love babies too much to hurt them," said Mother. "We think yours must be beautiful. May we not peep at them for just one little moment?"

"There are no babies out yet, only eggs are in the nest," said the bird.

"I should love to see the eggs," said Win.

"It is nearly hatching time. I can't come off them for an instant," the mother said. "But come and sit beside me and I will tell you all about them." She was not at all angry now.

CHAPTER XI

MOTHER-CARE

THE fairy birds hopped up and stood round the sitting mother, while the father bell-bird stood on a branch above her head, looking down on her with pride and love. She glanced up at him.

"He used to make love to me all day," she said. "He sang to me so beautifully that I could not go away. So we became mates, and we built this nest. We gathered twigs and grasses and long stems and wove them all together. What busy, happy days we had! Then we found big, soft feathers to line the nest, red and purple and green feathers to make it pretty inside.

"And then I laid my eggs, one each day. Such beautiful, beautiful eggs, Fairy-birds! I wish I could let you see them. Palest pink they are, with deep brown spots. Think what a picture they made, lying there among the bright feathers! But I had to cover them up, to keep them warm. I began to sit on them. Day after day through the gladness of the summer hours, night after night under the quiet stars shining through the tree, I have been sitting here, and tongue could not tell out all my happiness. I dare not sing about it as my mate is free to do, for no enemy must find the nest; but the thought of it is always in my heart.

"Soon the babies will be coming out, the dear

ones! Then we shall be busy indeed. No time for singing then!" She nodded to her mate. "Go, dearest, sing while you have time to sing," she said. "I love to hear you."

He flew off to his rata tree, singing as he went.

"Thank you for telling us the pretty story of your nest," said Mother. "We are going farther into the forest to look for babies. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said the bell-bird. She looked over the side of the nest to watch them go, but there was no anger in her eyes now.

Deeper into the forest they went. Happening to look down at a young tree, they saw a strange sight on the ground. Round its thin stem dry sticks had been set, one end leaning against the stem, the other end resting on the earth, so that they made a little hut. Farther out, scores and scores of sticks, crossed one on top of the other, lay in a big ring. Over the open space that lay between them and the hut was laid a carpet of green leaves and moss, and freshly gathered flowers and dead beetles with brightly coloured backs, some blue, some green.

"There must be children about," said Twin. "They have been making a play-place."

"No. See! it is a bower-bird," said Mother.

A bright brown bird with a great orange-coloured crest hopped into sight.

"Come!" he called. "Come and see the pretty playground I have made. See! it is green with mosses and gay with flowers and bright beetles.'

"I wonder whether he is calling to us," Father whispered.

"No, it is to someone hiding in the bushes," said

Mother. "See how he turns his head and watches. Another bird must be there."

"Come!" he called again; and now the family could see a bright bird-eye peering at him through the bushes. "Come! My pretty garden waits. I will dance and sing for you."

He flew into the garden where the flowers and mosses lay, and began to dance on one leg, making a queer gurgling noise in his throat. He looked so funny that the fairy birds wanted to shriek with laughter, but they dared not make a sound for fear he would leave off dancing.

Presently the bird in the bushes flew out across the garden, hiding again in the bushes on the other side.

"Come and play with me and be my mate," called the father bird, "and we will look for a nesting place."

"Catch me then," the other called in answer, and off went the two in a merry chase.

The family flew on. A mother starling sat on a pine tree, crying aloud:

"My eggs," she wailed. "My precious eggs are gone."

The father bird hopped up and down the branch, trying to be cheerful; but his tail hung down, and his eyes were sad, and even the sheen on his back looked less bright than usual. He touched his mate here and there with his beak, and whispered love-words to her, but he could not comfort her.

"Four beautiful eggs there were," she sobbed; "four beautiful eggs, blue as the summer sky. Some enemy has found the nest and eaten them."

"Oh, dear, how dreadful!" said Win.

The starling took no notice. Indeed, she was too sorrowful to hear anything but her own cries.

"Life of my life, they were!" she wailed. "In my body they were formed, in my love-warmed body, throbbing with hope and joy. There they grew and were guarded till they were shelled and perfect and ready to be laid in the nest we had built with tender care. Now they are gone—they are gone!

"In those shells so thin and blue were stored all the fine beginnings of the baby birds. Some day they would have come out into the world to fly through the sunshine on their wonderful wings, and to fill the air with music from their wonderful throats. But they are gone—they are gone!"

"Oh, come away," said Mother. "Her sadness hurts my heart. We cannot help her, and I cannot bear to listen any longer."

In a little round nest of hairs and fibres and spider thread woven beautifully together sat a mother goldfinch, crooning softly to herself. She stopped, and bent her head to listen to a sound beneath her.

"Push hard, my sweet," she said tenderly. "Ah, you are out! Dear helpless one, sit closely under my warm breast and let me shelter you." Her eyes were bright as stars with love and joy. "They are coming out now. They are coming out," she whispered. She opened her beak and sang the Love-song of the Mothers in notes so sweet and glad that the family forgot the unhappy starling and smiled again.

"Life of my life! You come at last.
We waited, the world and I.
Joy of my heart! The waiting is past,
For here in your beauty you lie.

"Hope of the hours! The sun is bright,
The beautiful sky is blue.
Dream of the days! The world all alight
Is glad with its welcome to you.

"Life of my life, so loved, so near!
We waited, the world and I.
Joy of my heart, most precious, most dear!
How sweet in your beauty you lie!"

A thrush in the next tree was trying to teach her little ones to fly.

"Don't be afraid," she was saying. "Let yourselves drop. See! I have a caterpillar. Come for it."

The babies stood on the branch beside the nest, and the mother stood on a thicker branch below. The father watched beside the little ones, encouraging them.

"See!" he said. "This is the way to do it. Spread your wings, loosen your foothold, and dive." He flew down slowly, beating his wings to show how they should be used. "Come!" he called from the mother bird's side.

The birdlings peered doubtfully down through the empty space.

"It looks so far," they said.

"It is only a little way," said the mother. "I shall eat the caterpillar myself if you don't come soon."

Two of the babies took courage and dropped, flapping and struggling with their little new wings, but landing safely at last beside their mother. At once they opened their beaks for the caterpillar, which the mother divided, giving half to each.

The third baby stood by the nest and shivered.

"I can't do it," he said. "It is too far."

The father flew up beside him and showed him how to spread his wings, but the baby would not try.

"I can't do it," was all he would say.

The father lost patience at last.

"You can do it," he said, and he gave a sudden push that knocked the baby off his perch. Out went his wings, and down he, too, flapped and fluttered, to alight on the branch with the most comical look of surprise on his face.

"Why, it feels quite nice!" he said. He raised his wings and flew along the branch. "I liked that," he said.

"So did I!" and "So did I!" chimed in the other babies. "Let us fly again."

"Where is my share of the caterpillar, Mother?" asked the third one.

"You were too slow," she said. "But I will find another."

She found another and flew farther down the tree with it.

"Come!" she called again.

This time the third one was first, but the others followed quickly for their share.

"Well done!" said the mother. "Now rest awhile. New little wings soon weary You can try again presently."

They settled in a line on the branch to rest, the father at one end and the mother at the other.

"Parents have much to do," she said to Mother.

"Yes, indeed," said Mother.

"First there is the building of the nest," said the bird; "then the long brooding on the eggs, then the feeding and the anxious care, and now the teaching."

"Yes," said Mother.

"There is so much to be taught," she went on; "how to fly upwards as well as downwards, how to balance and poise and guide oneself; how to hunt for food and where to find it; how to hide from danger and when to keep still. Many an anxious moment shall we have before these things are all known. A mother's life is full of care."

"And happiness," said Mother softly.

"And happiness!" agreed the bird; and her eyes were glad.

A sound of scolding came from a tree near by. The family flew to see what was going on.

CHAPTER XII

THE PARROT AND HER NEIGHBOURS

A GREEN and red parrot was chiding her two big children.

" Great grown-up creatures that you are ! " she said. " Why should I be followed by you any longer ? Am I always to feed you and protect you ? Go away. Go away. Live your own lives among the flock, and find your own food." She gave each of them a peck.

" There they go," she said, as they flew off. " Now they are gone indeed. All these months I have loved them and cared for them, and now at the end I have to pretend to be cruel and send them away."

" Why do you have to be cruel to them ? " asked Twin.

" Why did you peck them ? " asked Win.

" If I didn't do it they would never learn to take care of themselves," said the parrot. " They must go out into the world and find their own food, for some day they will have to feed babies as well. They have much to learn before then, and it is high time they were beginning to learn it."

" You send them away for their own good," said Father.

" Yes, for their own good," she replied. " I shall be lonely and I shall miss their pretty ways, but go they must."

" Here is their old home," she said. She showed the family a hollow in the tree. In it was the nest.

" How empty and lonely it looks now ! " said Mother.

" Yes," she said. " In the forest there are empty and lonely homes wherever the babies have flown away. Here is another, look ! hanging under this branch by the pool. Fantails built this. I sat in my hollow and looked out at them for weeks, and listened to all their pretty talk. ' Love-in-a-Nest ' I called their home when it was made and the babies had come."

" Will you tell us about it ? " asked Mother.

" Well, it began with the fantail mother finding this pool. ' It is good to be near one's food when one has a hungry family,' she said wisely. ' There will be millions of gnats and mayflies hatched from those eggs in the water. They will provide plenty of food for the babies.'

" She sat on a twig, opening and shutting her pretty fan, which is her tail, you know. ' It is time to be making that nest,' she said.

" Father fantail darted from his twig, caught a passing fly, and came back again. ' I am ready, pretty one,' he said. ' What shall I gather first ? '

" ' Bring tiny chips of wood as thin as you can get them,' she said. ' I go to gather spider web.'

" He brought the wood and she brought the spider web. ' Now we must work hard,' she said ; ' and we must be very careful.'

" With the silky web she tied the chips to the branch, using her little beak in the most wonderful way. It was charming to watch her.

" At last the bottom of the nest was made. ' Bring more spider web,' she said, ' and dry grass and mosses.'

" Father fantail brought web and hair, grasses and mosses, anything thready that he could find. Mother fantail flew up and down for scraps too, and as each was brought she wove it into the nest and trampled it with her feet, or pushed the sides of the nest with her body to make it round, till it was like a cup.

" At last the pretty nest was made ; and at last the two little birds had time to talk. They hopped round it again and again, twittering with delight. ' Now it is finished,' they said. ' What a cosy home for our babies who will come ! '

" Next morning mother fantail sat in the nest a long time. Then she flew out. ' Come and see ! The egg is little and white, with pretty brown spots at one end,' she called joyfully. The father flew to see it. ' It is the sweetest thing in the world,' he said. It was delightful to see them so proud and happy over their home and their first egg.

" Next day another egg lay there. Soon there were four. The long sitting began. Day after day, night after night, the mother brooded above her eggs, hardly ever leaving them. Father fantail brought food to her, or sang in the tree-tops down the creek : ' Our nest is full of love.'

" At last the mother heard the sound of pecking in the shells. Cracking and pushing, one by one four baby birds came out. So tiny and helpless they were, but how their mother loved them ! She cuddled them under her warm soft breast. ' Dear ones ! ' I heard her say.

" Now the father was busy all day, hunting the flies that flew up from the stream. Four hungry babies had to be fed. Soon the mother had to help, for the babies grew fast and cried for more. Up and down, to and fro, the parents flew from morning till night and from morning till night again, hunting, catching, feeding. No time for singing now, no time for anything but work till these dear ones had grown and could find food for themselves.

" But the father and mother were happy. ' Our nest is full of love,' they said. ' The whole world is full of love.'

" By and by came the teaching, and the little family flew away. I missed them, for they had been pleasant neighbours. But it is always so ; the nest must be emptied : the babies must grow up and go out into the world."

" The dear little fantails ! " said Win. " I wish I had seen them."

" You seem to have kept your eyes and ears open," said Mother to the parrot.

" One learns much by sitting still," she said " But all neighbours are not so pleasant as the fantails. Last year we nested in a hollow tree on the sea-coast, and a pair of blue penguins burrowed below us. They were the queerest neighbours we ever had."

" There is another story coming," said Twin joyfully, and the family settled down to listen in a line on the branch—big golden Father at one end, snow-white Mother at the other, and the little humming-bird twins in the middle.

" I was looking out from my hole," said the parrot,

" when two big birds came swimming through the sea. They stopped and looked up at the rocky bank under my tree. ' This will do nicely,' said the penguin mother.

" ' Are you pleased at last ? ' asked the penguin father. ' I thought some of the places we passed were good enough.'

" ' Nothing but the very best is good enough for our babies,' said the mother. ' You ought to know that. Now this is the best spot along the coast. Let us begin to burrow at once.'

" She led the way from the sea. ' See that strip of earth above the rocks ? ' asked the mother. ' That is where we must burrow. It is close to the sea, and yet it is high enough to be above the reach of enemies.'

" Up the steep rock the two birds climbed, using their flipper-wings as hands. Such strange wings they were ! The feathers seemed to have turned to scales. When they reached the soft earth they found a little ledge on which to rest. There they set to work to make their burrow. I began to think they could not be birds after all.

" I said to my mate when he came home, ' Two of the queerest things I ever saw came out of the sea to-day. I thought at first they might be birds, but they don't seem to fly. Besides, they are burrowing in the ground like the rats and rabbits. Listen, you can hear them now.'

" My mate flew down to look. The penguins were still burrowing. They had made a long, narrow hole into the side of the hill.

" My mate asked, ' Are you birds ? '

" ' Of course we are. What a silly question to ask ! ' said the penguin mother. ' But we are too busy to talk. Don't stand there staring like that. It is rude.'

" My mate flew back to me, not at all pleased with the penguin's snappy answer. ' You must excuse her,' I told him. ' She seems to be in a hurry, and if it is a nest for her babies that she is making, she is sure to be anxious to keep strangers away from it.'

" He said, ' They say they are birds, and they really have feathers and a bill, and big webbed toes like the ducks. But their wings ! Whoever saw such things ? And whoever heard of birds burrowing ? '

" ' Birds do the strangest things sometimes,' I reminded him.

" When the burrow was finished it must have been nearly as long as this branch. I was so curious that I walked in one day while the two birds were away fishing. At the dark end there were two big white eggs. I could just see them through the dimness. I hurried out again, for fear the birds would return. Next day the mother was sitting to hatch them out. I didn't see her for weeks—in fact, not till the babies were hatched and were able to come out on the ledge.

" The babies were even funnier than their father and mother. They stood so upright on their tiny far-back legs, and their little flippers hung so queerly by their soft, downy sides, that we really couldn't help laughing at them.

" ' I never saw such funny babies,' said my mate

to the penguin mother. He never would be careful enough in his remarks. 'Why do they stand so upright?'

"'Because their legs are where they are,' she snapped out. 'They are prettier than your babies, I am sure.'

"'Silly old thing! She needn't be so cross,' said my mate when he came back. 'Prettier than our babies, indeed! And what a noise they make!'

"'You ought to know better than to tell any mother that her babies are queer,' I told him. 'Every mother in the world thinks her babies are the prettiest and most wonderful babies that ever were.'

"The penguins were certainly a noisy family. For hours during the day, when they might have been busy, they would sit asleep, with their heads tucked under those absurd wings of theirs. Then when night came, and well-behaved birds went to bed, they would wake up and talk to one another, and the parents would go fishing with such a calling and fuss that nobody within hearing could get any sleep.

"And when the babies were hungry, and their parents were slow in bringing their meals from the sea, what a crying there was, to be sure! 'Bad training,' said my mate. 'We never allow our children to scream like that.'

"The penguin babies grew bigger and bigger, and at last their feathers came. 'Come down to the sea and learn to fish,' said their father one day.

"They followed him half-way down; then they stood still.

"'Afraid? Nonsense!' said their mother. She

gave each of them a sudden push, and down they fell into the sea.

"'Oh, did you see that?' my mate screamed to me. 'The poor little things will be drowned.'

"But they were not in the least drowned. They were swimming, as happy as could be. Their mother had known the right thing to do. There they swam, their heads up, but their bodies under water, their webbed feet stretched out behind, their flipper wings, so useless on the land, now doing most of the work.

"They went after a cuttle-fish. The babies were taught how to dive and chase and catch. Then the family ate it under the water—'a thing no other bird can do!' said the penguin mother proudly to me afterwards. We had become rather friendly by this time, though my mate never liked her.

"'But we can fly!' I said. 'Don't you wish you knew the joy of flying through the air?'

"She replied, 'We have the joy of flying through the water. We dart through the water faster than you dart through the air. And such feasts we find! It is a splendid life. We wouldn't change it for any other.'

"For weeks the penguins stayed about the bay, till the young ones were big and strong, and could fish well. Then they left the shore for the open sea. There was a flapping of flipper-wings, a long, long dive through the green waves, and far beyond the farthest point of land their heads came up, their eyes turned towards the wide blue line that met the sky. We never saw them again.

"'Queer neighbours, and a queer life!' said my mate. And I agreed with him."

CHAPTER XIII

THE PHŒNIX

"BIRD babies seem to be better off than most of the babies we have seen," said Father. "They are cared for by both parents. Most of the other babies had only the mother's care. A few had only the father's."

"Are there any bird-fathers who mind the eggs and babies without the mother's help?" asked Twin.

"No, indeed," said the parrot. "At least, I have never seen any, and I don't believe any bird-mother would leave her babies to the father's care; nor would any father-bird have the patience to sit on the eggs to hatch them out. Fathers may be loving, but they are not so loving as we are. Why, down there where the forest touches the river a mother was drowned the other day rather than desert her eggs. No father loves so much as that."

"Please tell us about her," begged Win. The parrot was a fine story-teller.

"It was a wild hen," said the parrot. "There is a flock of them in that part of the forest, with one great cock who lords it over them all, and is very splendid indeed *He* doesn't help to mind the babies, though he is the father of them all. He only struts about and says, 'Do what I tell you.' And everybody does it.

"Well, this hen I am going to tell you about made a nest under some bushes close by the edge of the river. It was high and dry and cosy, and seemed safe enough, and she was delighted with the snug spot. And how proud she was of her eggs! Every time she laid one she would run through the bushes or fly through the trees till she was a long way off, so that no enemy could tell where the nest lay, and then—such a cackling! such pride and joy! Hens are noisy creatures, you know. When she cackled beneath my tree I thought she would deafen me.

"When all her eggs were laid she began to sit. Such a devoted mother! She would scarcely leave her eggs for a moment. I don't know how she kept herself alive during those three weeks.

"The eggs were just about to hatch when there came a great storm that brought the mountain waters down and swelled the river till it overflowed its banks. She sat and watched the water rising, rising, creeping towards her nest; but she did not move. Presently it touched the nest, rose among the stems and straws.

"'You must leave your eggs,' I called to her. 'The river is rising fast, and will cover you if you stay.'

"'I will never leave my eggs,' she said.

"'The other hens have all flown up into the trees,' I called.

"She said, 'My chickens are almost ready to come out. They are alive and moving. I cannot leave my darlings to be drowned.'

"'Then you will all be drowned,' I called.

"'I must keep them warm,' she said. 'Perhaps

the dreadful water will not rise any higher. Even if it does I must stay here. I cannot leave my babies to their fate.'

"The river rose and rose, and still she sat above the eggs, though the cold water was now all among them, chilling her trembling body. At last it rose above her and washed her off the nest. The poor drowned creature went floating down to the sea. That is how a mother can love."

"Poor thing! Poor thing!" said Father; but Mother's eyes were shining.

"She was splendid!" she said. "I know how she felt about it."

"Please have you any more stories to tell us?" asked Win

"I am tired of telling stories," said the parrot, "but I think I will come with you a little way into the forest. I know where two hornbills are nesting; I will show you their home if you like. I saw them making their hollow in the trunk of a tree not far from here. They pecked out the wood, and then dropped chips and dust into the hole to make it soft for the eggs. By this time the eggs must be laid."

"We should like to see the nest," said Mother; and the parrot led them at once to the spot.

The mother hornbill sat in her hollow, only her head and neck showing, and the father stood on a branch in front of her. Their great yellow beaks and black and white feathers shone handsomely among the green and brown of the tree.

"What tremendous beaks!" Win whispered to Twin.

"I shouldn't like a peck from one," whispered Twin. "I say, Win, they've got eyelashes—like ours, when we are not birds. They are the first birds I ever saw with eyelashes."

The two great birds were talking together very seriously.

"All my eggs are laid," the mother was saying, "and now I shall begin to sit. I shall not come off again till they are hatched."

"Then it is time to wall you in," said the father He turned and saw with surprise all the strange birds clustered round.

"Good day, Phœnix!" said the parrot. "These are fairy birds who are passing through the forest. I am sure they would be interested to watch your walling-up."

"Then they are welcome to stay and see it," said the hornbill politely.

The mother hornbill sat still on her eggs, but the father flew down to the edge of the pond, where he gathered a great lump of wet clay in his beak. He brought it to the nest and plastered it over an edge of the hollow. Again and again he went to the pond and came back to the tree, each time spreading more and more clay around the opening and across it, till a smooth wall was formed.

The family looked on with amazement. "Why does he do that?" asked Twin.

"To keep the eggs warm and safe from enemies," said the parrot.

"But soon the mother won't be able to breathe!" cried Win.

"A hole will be left in the middle of the wall,"

said the mother. "I shall be able to poke my head through."

"But you can't get out to eat," said Twin.

"My mate will feed me," she said. "Every day he will bring fruit and lizards and beetles and moths and put them into my beak. He will not forget me."

"But when the babies are hatched—how can they be fed?" asked Win.

"Then we shall break away the clay with our beaks, the father and I," said the bird, "and fresh air and food can come in for the babies. We shall guard them in turn, one sitting over them while the other finds a meal for them."

"Well," said Mother, "I think you are clever birds indeed, to think out a safe hiding-place for your babies."

"Oh, we two didn't think it out," said the bird. "Our ever-so-many-great-great-grandmothers have done this for thousands of years. It is in the family."

"But I should hate to sit still for so long with no room to move," said Win. "It must be hot and stuffy in there."

"It does become rather hot," said the bird; "but a mother can bear that for the sake of her babies. And I can still poke out my head, you know." She pushed it out and drew it in again to show that there was room, and the father plastered a little more clay round the edges of the hole that was left, using his beak for a trowel. "There! It is finished," he said.

"Well done, Phœnix!" said the parrot. "You are quick at your work."

"Phœnix! You called him that before," said Father. "Why do you call him Phœnix?"

"Oh, we call him that for fun," said the parrot. "Don't you know about that? Why, this is *the* Phœnix!"

"*The* Phœnix!" exclaimed Father. "Do you mean the Phœnix of the fables, the wonderful bird that the old writers tell about?"

"The very same!" said the parrot.

Father gazed at the hornbill with great respect, but the bird drooped his eyelashes over his eyes and would not look pleased. "It is a silly story," he said, "and the parrot only keeps it up to tease."

"Nonsense!" said the parrot. "You know you are as proud as Punch of being in all those old books."

"Tell us about it," begged Father.

"It is a silly story," said the bird again. "Ages ago some men saw a hornbill walling up his mate at hatching time. They didn't know that it was hatching time, nor that the walled-in one was the mother bird. Because they themselves covered their dead parents with earth, they said, 'There is a bird burying his dead father.' And when, a few weeks later, the mother bird broke through the clay and flew out, they said, 'The dead father has come to life again, young and strong.'

"The story of the bird who rose from the grave was told again and again, each time differently, until it became so wonderful that you would hardly know it as the same story. And a man wrote it down and called the bird Phœnix."

"In some of the books it says that the old Phœnix

cast itself into flames and came out young and strong," said Father.

"That is one of the different ways of telling the story," said the hornbill.

"Well, I have always wondered what the Phœnix was really like," said Father. "I am delighted to meet you at last." And he bowed his golden head politely to the hornbills. "It is something to be in the story-books," he said.

The father hornbill bowed his head in return, but the mother could only bob her beak.

"And now I must hunt for my wife's dinner and my own," said the father. "Good-bye." He flew off.

"Good-bye, you splendid Phœnix," said Mother softly to the hornbill on her nest. "You are certainly buried, but you are far more wonderful than the story, for you will not only come out young and strong, but you will bring out others young and strong from beneath the clay."

CHAPTER XIV

SURPRISES

A LITTLE green bird flitted by.

"There is a tailor-bird," said the parrot. "That is caterpillar silk in her mouth, so she must be making her nest. Shall we follow her?"

"Of course!" The fairy birds were already flying.

"Why do you call her the tailor-bird?" asked Win, and "What does she do with the caterpillar-silk?" asked Twin.

"She sews with it, and that is why we call her the tailor-bird," said the parrot, answering both questions at once.

"Sews with it? Has she a needle?"

They reached the nest, and the answer to the last question was before them. The tailor-bird was sewing, and the needle was her thin sharp beak. She was sewing together two large leaves that grew on a low bush. With her beak she pierced holes in the sides of the leaves; through the holes she drew the caterpillar silk, fixing it firmly and passing it through one leaf and then through the other, till the two leaves were sewn edge to edge half-way up their length.

"That will do nicely," she said.

She flew into the green cup she had made.

"It is quite strong," she said; "now bring the down from cotton seeds to make the nest."

She was not talking to the fairy birds, but to her mate: she was far too busy to take notice of visitors. The mate sat on a twig near, watching her with the greatest interest. Now they both flew off.

In a few seconds they were back, bringing the white cotton-down in their beaks.

In the green cup the mother bird began to twist the down into a little round nest, light, and swinging safely, hidden between the sewn leaves. "More! We need more down!" she said, and they flew below to get it.

"Well," said Mother, "birds are wonderful! Who would have believed they could sew?"

"That is not all they can do," said the parrot. "There are some who can weave. Come, I know where a weaver is making her nest."

She led them to a tall palm tree beside the forest stream. Under one of its great fronds, stretched far over the water, there hung a queer flask-shaped nest. The upper end, fastened firmly to the palm frond, was closed and rounded; from its side hung down a long spout, open at the lower end. At this opening two weavers were working, the father bird holding gathered threads and fibres in his beak, the mother bird twining and twisting them into the spout.

In and out the hanging threads she guided them with her quick beak, under and over, over and under, just as cloth is made. The family could not take their eyes off her. It was real weaving, the cleverest nest-making in the world.

"But won't the eggs tumble down that long spout and fall into the water?" Win asked.

The mother-weaver darted a quick look at her.

"You may fly up and see," she said, without stopping her work for more than a second.

Win flew up a long spout, and Twin followed as a matter of course.

Presently they came down.

"There is the loveliest, cosiest nest at the top," said Win, "like a little round room with a roof to it."

"And there is a wall built between the spout and the nest, so that the eggs will not fall out," said Twin. "We had to fly over it to see the nest."

"I should like to go up and see it," said Mother, "but just now I am far too big."

"I would rather watch the weaving," said Father. "It is so clever! I can't think how birds have learned to do it."

"Love and danger are the teachers," said the parrot. "The little ones are loved so dearly that they must needs be cradled safely. In the forest there are many enemies, but even a snake could not reach the babies in this nest. Love and danger have taught the race their cunning.

"I can show you an even more wonderful nesting-place than this," she went on.

"We shall be glad to see it," said Mother.

"It is in a tree that stands by itself beyond the forest," said the parrot.

They flew above the tree-tops till they came to the open ground.

"There's a strange bird! Whatever is he doing?" said the parrot suddenly. They all flew down to look.

A great mound of rubbish lay on the ground under

the last tree of the forest—dead leaves and stems and grasses. A big bird was adding to the heap, scratching up the litter from the ground and flinging it on the mound.

"Why, it is a brush turkey," said Father. "I saw one in Australia years ago."

The bird stopped his scratching and looked up at his visitors.

"Good-day!" he said. "A fine nest, isn't it? Made it all by myself!"

"A nest?" exclaimed Win. "You don't call that a nest!"

"Indeed I do," cried the mound bird angrily. "Let me tell you it is the finest nest you have ever seen. Where can you find a better one? Now answer me that."

"Up in the trees there are beautiful nests," said Twin; "some are sewn, and some are all woven together."

"But not one of them can hatch the eggs without the mother," shouted the mound bird. "Mine can. You think this is only a great heap of rubbish, I know you do But I tell you it is nest and incubator as well."

"How?" asked Twin; and "Tell us," begged Win, and the others crowded round to hear.

The mound bird was beginning to look happier.

"I make my heap," he said, "and the mothers come and lay their eggs in it. When they have finished laying I cover the eggs, and the decaying rubbish makes a heat which hatches them. Every few days I rake over the top with my claws to keep it open and free, and after six weeks the chicks come

out of the shells and push their way through the leaves and run away to find their food. Now what do you think of my nest? Isn't it as wonderful as I said it was?"

"It is indeed!" said Mother.

"Then the mothers don't sit on the eggs at all," said Twin.

"Not at all," said the bird.

Twin turned to the parrot.

"You said no father bird would mind the eggs without the mother's help," he said.

"I am as much surprised as you are," said she. "But though he makes the nest and watches it, he doesn't sit on the eggs," she added. "No father has the patience for weeks of brooding."

"Why should I sit on the eggs when I have found out an easier way of hatching them?" asked the mound bird sharply. "That would be silly."

Win had been thinking about the forest and its dangers.

"Your nest is on the ground," she said "Won't enemies find the eggs?"

"I can fight! I will kill them all! They dare not touch my eggs!" shouted the bird, and he puffed out his feathers and looked so fierce that Win backed away from him.

"You are so big and strong!" said Mother. "You can defend your eggs, but little birds must build in the trees, and must hatch the eggs with the warmth of their bodies."

"Come on," said the parrot. "There is the nest I was telling you about." She pointed with a claw to a tree that stood on the plain.

"What a queer tree!" said Twin, as they rose into the air. "There seems to be a tent in it."

"That is the nest," said the parrot.

The fairy birds stared with amazement. The nest was so huge that it almost filled the tree, and it was shaped like a tent with a rounded peak at the top.

"Some giant bird must have built it," said Father.

"Not a giant bird, but a colony of little birds," said the parrot. "These are the weavers who build together in one big house. Here we are. You can see for yourselves."

The tent was a roof thatched with dry grass. On it sat weaver birds no bigger than the two who had woven the nest under the palm tree. From the eaves bright eyes peeped out at the strangers.

"We are friends," said the parrot. "These are fairy birds."

"May we look in?" asked Mother.

"Certainly," replied the weavers.

Under the roof were dozens of nests, cleverly hidden in the cool shelter of the great thatched dome. In some the eggs were laid; in others they were being hatched. Father birds sang or flitted to and fro, mother birds talked to one another from their nests, or swung down on their fine feet to look at the visitors.

"Well, you are a happy family!" said Father.

"That is just what we are," said one of the weavers. "We live here so happily together that I have often wondered why other birds don't follow our plan."

"It seems a good plan," said Father.

"It is a good plan," said the weaver. "None of us need be lonely; not even the mothers when they are brooding. And think how safe it keeps the babies! If an enemy comes near, there are always dozens of birds about the nests to protect them. We are not very big, but when we all flap and peck and screech together, we can frighten away almost any foe."

"I should think——" began Father; but he did not finish, for a sudden outcry made everybody fly to see what was the matter.

A big brown bird was fleeing from a fierce crowd of smaller forest birds, who darted at her and stabbed at her with their beaks.

"Go away! Go away!" they shrieked. "Lazy creature! Loveless mother! You shall not leave your work for us to do."

"It is the cuckoo," said the weavers, and they returned to their nests; but the fairy birds followed the cuckoo to see what would happen, and the parrot went with them.

"The cuckoo won't bring up her own children," she said. "She puts her eggs in the nests of other birds, and leaves them to be hatched and fed by the other mothers."

"How dreadful of her!" cried Win.

The cuckoo was a swift flier, and the forest birds could not keep up with her.

"Loveless mother! Lazy creature!" they jeered.

She was well away from them now, and had time to reply.

"I shall come back again when you are not look-

ing," she screamed, " and I shall put my eggs in your nests and you will hatch them with yours. And you will feed my babies, because you cannot bear to see them starve. And even when they have pushed your own babies from the nest and killed them, you will still feed my young ones rather than see them die. Ha, ha ! Silly birds ! Go back to your nests. I will find them before long."

She flew away across the land, leaving the forest birds far behind.

" All that she says is true," said the parrot. " She is sure to come back and leave her eggs in other birds' nests, and her young ones will kill the little nestlings and take all their food."

" It is shocking," said Mother.

" So we all think," said the parrot. " She is a bad mother, and is well hated in the forest."

Below lay a swamp, where the stream had widened and soaked into the low-lying land. On a high clump of rushes sat a big dark-blue bird with a scarlet head.

" Why, it is a swamp-hen from our own New Zealand ! " said Father.

They all flew down at once.

" Good day, swamp-hen ! " said Father. " How still you sit ! "

" Good day ! I am a father bird. I am hatching the eggs—that is why I sit so still."

Twin looked at the parrot.

" A father bird hatching the eggs ! " he exclaimed.

The parrot stared at the blue bird.

" Why do you do it ? " she asked.

"Three mothers laid their eggs in this nest," he said. "The first and second sat by turns till their chicks came out, then they walked off with their families. But the third one would not sit at all, so I have to take her place. I shall stay here till the chicks are all out. Then I shall feed them and mind them till they are old enough to take care of themselves."

"What a good father!" said Mother.

"The babies must be cared for," he said. "They are too precious to be lost, and if the mother won't mind them the father must."

"Well, well," said the parrot. "I am going back home to tell my mate about this. Two fathers who mind the eggs without the mother's help! And one of them is actually going to lead the babies about and feed them. It is most astonishing. Good-bye, fairy birds! A pleasant trip to you. Babyland is full of wonders."

"It is indeed," said Mother. "Good-bye, Lady Parrot. We are sorry to part with you."

"Good-bye!" they all called, and the parrot flew home.

"When we were high in the air I saw the Cradle Ship over there beyond the stream," said Mother. "Let us go to it and see if the spider bag is safe."

As they flew over the water a great white swan called to them from her nest among the reeds.

"Beautiful fairy birds, are you happy?" she called. "Are you as happy as I am, sitting here on my nest?"

"We are happy," Mother replied. "Why are you so happy, sitting there on your nest?"

"Because I am full of love," she answered; "because I am warm with love for my little ones who are coming out. They are coming out, coming out soon."

A blue kingfisher, brilliant as a sapphire, shot past them through the air, dived into the water, and came up with a fish quivering in his spear-like beak.

"It is for my babies," he said as he disappeared into his tunnel in the bank.

In a high tree a dove as white as Mother was feeding her children. One by one they put their beaks into her mouth and took up the sweet white food that came from her crop. She looked up as the fairy birds passed, and her eyes were bright with pride.

"Did you ever see such clever children as mine?" she cried. "It is a joy to feed them."

CHAPTER XV

BABY-BAGS

THE family reached the Cradle Ship only just in time. On its edges, on the tip of mast and sail, hundreds of tiny spiders stood, each spinning a long fine thread. They had burst their way out of the egg bag, had wandered all over the Cradle Ship, and were now making ready to voyage out into the world.

"We are going to fly!" shouted one in his tiny baby voice. "Hurrah! It will be splendid!"

"But you have no wings. How can you fly?" asked Twin.

"Our threads will do for wings," replied the spider. "They are long, and we are little and light. The wind will lift them and carry them along, and we shall go with them till we find a good place to settle and live. Are you ready, brothers and sisters? Off we go! Away, away!"

They sprang off the edges of the ship, and in a moment were floating through the air, carried by their gossamer threads on the wind. Off they went, hundreds of tiny specks high against the sky, brightening the air with their streaks of glistening silk.

"That was very pretty," said Mother.

"It deserves a poem," said Father, and down he sat in the Cradle Ship to make one. The others waited on the edge.

"A little round ball as white as the snow!
You never would think it a nest.
Yet in it are babies who lie there and grow,
All in their cradle at rest.

"Hundreds of babies so tiny and grey!
You never would think they could spin.
Yet each with ease as if at his play,
Draws silvery silk from within.

"Gossamer threads from babies so wee!
You never would think they could hold.
Yet out on those threads over hillock and tree
Go sailing those babies so bold."

"What are you doing? What is that in your claw? I never saw a bird with a thing like that before!" The voice came from over Father's head.

Everybody looked up. A pretty little bright-eyed opossum peered at them through the over-hanging branches of a tree close by. She ran down the tree, ran up the side of the ship, and stared at Father.

"What are those things in your claws?" she asked.

"This is a notebook," said Father, "and the other is a lead pencil."

"Queer names!" said the opossum. "I never heard them before. What are you doing with the notebook and lead pencil?"

"Writing words," replied Father. "But claws are not so useful as hands. They don't grip the pencil so well."

"How do you know that?" asked the opossum.

"I used to have hands once," said Father.

"Good gracious! A bird with hands! You must have looked queer!"

"I wasn't a bird then," said Father. "I was a man."

The opossum poked her nose in the air

"What big stories you tell!" she said. "Fancy expecting me to believe that!"

Father laughed.

"You needn't," he said. "It doesn't matter."

"We are fairy birds," said Mother. "We were people before."

"Oh, fairy birds, are you? That explains things," said the opossum "Why are you fairy birds?"

Now it was Mother who laughed.

"You ask as many questions as the twins," she said.

"Who are the twins?" asked the opossum.

Before Mother could answer the twins darted forward and stood close under the opossum's breast, staring up into her soft brown fur.

"It's a baby!" cried Win. "There it is again!"

"I saw its eyes and its little head!" cried Twin.

"Oh, there's another! Now where have they gone?"

The opossum beamed with pride.

"Of course they are babies," she said. "The dearest, prettiest babies you ever saw. Come up, my pets, and show yourselves," she said gently.

One baby popped out his head again

"See his fine nose and his pretty ears!" said the mother. "Isn't he a beauty?"

The other baby looked out.

"Why, they are in a pocket!" exclaimed Win.

"My baby-bag!" explained the mother. "I keep them warm and safe in there, till they are able to run about and take care of themselves. They go with me wherever I go."

"What a splendid plan!" said Mother.

"What sort of nest did you make?" asked Win.

"Nest! I didn't make any nest. I am not a bird."

"Then where did you lay your eggs?" asked Win.

"I don't lay eggs; I lay babies," said the opossum. "As I said, I am not a bird."

The twins stared at her. Laying babies! That was a new and astonishing idea. Twin spoke next.

"But bees and butterflies and frogs and fishes lay eggs, as well as the birds," he said. "The eggs come down a wonderful little tube. The dragon-fly showed us."

The opossum nodded.

"I know," she said. "It is just the same with us, only it is a baby that comes down the tube, instead of an egg. Such helpless, tender-skinned little darlings they were when I picked them up and put them in my baby-bag. Now they are big and their fur has grown, and they will soon be able to come out and run up the trees." She stroked a baby's head with a loving paw.

"How strange it is!" said Win. "All the babies we have seen were eggs at first, but these were not."

"Yes, they were," said the opossum; "the tiniest, softest little eggs! But they were hatched inside my warm body, where they were safe from enemies. That is the best plan for babies—far better than laying eggs. Why, nobody could even see them till they came out, and then I popped them at once into the baby-bag, and have kept them there ever since. I wouldn't leave them about in a nest, as the birds do."

"But their nests are so clever!" said Twin.

"And so carefully hidden," said Win.

"And yet enemies sometimes find them," said the opossum "I have seen both eggs and young ones eaten while the mothers were away for food."

The twins remembered the starling.

"Yes," said Win. "Your way seems the safest."

"So I think. And when you have finished admiring the 'possum's babies, you might look at mine!"

It was a mother kangaroo speaking. She had come to the side of the Cradle Ship, and was standing high on her great hind-legs and tail, with her front legs hanging in the air. Between them hung a baby-bag, bigger and stronger than the opossum's; and over its edge peeped a kangaroo baby, with bright eyes and pointed ears.

"Oh!" cried Win, "you have a pocket too!"

"Yes," said the kangaroo, "and a baby in the pocket!"

"Was he an egg at first?" asked Twin.

"All babies are eggs at first," replied the kangaroo. "Some are hatched outside and some inside. Mine was hatched inside, like the 'possum's

baby, and as soon as he came out I put him in my baby-bag to keep him safe. He was the tiniest little fellow you could imagine, but see how he has grown, and how splendid he is!"

"I wish he could come out and play with us," said Win.

"He is not old enough yet," said the kangaroo. "His legs have to grow stronger."

CHAPTER XVI

FOLLOW THE FLAG

SOMETHING swift and dark shot past them in slanting flight from the high branch of a tree to a low branch of another.

"Now there's the flying lemur," said the kangaroo; "how much better it would be for her if she had a bag like ours!"

"And how much easier for the baby!" said the opossum. "Poor little thing! It must be dizzy work holding on like that."

"Is there a baby? We must see it," said Mother, and the family flew to look

The flying lemur was leaping up the trunk of the tree, stopping now and again to rest. She was a strange-looking creature Instead of wings, she had a great fold of skin down each side of her furry body, stretched like sails from limb to limb. Across her soft warm breast clung her baby His web of skin was there, but as yet no fur had grown.

"He must be very young," said Win, "but he doesn't look at all afraid."

"What a pity you have no pocket in your fur to hold your baby!" said Twin.

The flying lemur looked surprised.

"Baby is quite happy where he is," she said.

"But he might fall off when you fly!" exclaimed Win.

"Nonsense!" said the lemur. "He has a hook and ever so many sharp claws to hold on with."

"But surely he would be much less trouble to you if you had a bag to pop him into," said Father "He must get in your way, hanging on like that."

"Trouble indeed! The darling is no trouble at all. I like to have him there." The lemur was quite indignant. "I shall carry him about with me and feed him for a long, long while—till his fur has grown and he has learned to leap from tree to tree in search of fruit and leaves. Trouble indeed!" She took a flying leap far up the tree and was lost to sight.

"Well, she needn't have been so cross about it," said Twin. "We didn't mean to vex her."

"She is jealous because she hasn't a baby-bag like mine," said the opossum. "I must see what she is after. There may be something good up there."

Up the tree she ran, with her little ones looking down over the edge of their bag.

"Silly 'possum! Silly 'possum!" called a merry voice. "Thinks everyone must have a bag hung on in front to carry the babies about. Silly 'possum!"

"It's the squirrel. I can't bear her chatter," said the kangaroo, and off she went with her queer leaping walk, humping herself up and down with each step

The squirrel stood dancing and laughing on her branch.

"They are off!" she cried. "Come on here, fairy birds. I will show you the best place for babies."

In a fork of the tree was a covered nest made of dried mosses and grasses.

"My babies are not there," said the squirrel; "that is where I keep my winter store. I have a safer home for the babies."

She ran out to the thin end of a branch, where no heavy creature could follow her. Here she had built another nest.

"I am coming, my pretty ones," she called softly, and out from the nest peeped four beautiful baby squirrels.

"Oh, the darlings!" cried Win. "I do wish they would play with us." She tried to stroke one of them with her beak, but the baby edged away. "Your beak is hard," he said. The four ran out on the branch and climbed on their mother's back and played with her splendid tail and nestled in her soft red fur, the prettiest, merriest little babies the twins had seen.

"What could be better than a well-covered nest for babies?" said the squirrel. "It is lined with wool, and I can leave them there in warmth and quietness while I hunt for food, instead of having to drag them about with me wherever I go."

"Did you lay eggs or babies in your nest?" Win asked.

"Babies," she answered. "I am not a bird, or a beetle, or a frog, that I should lay eggs."

"Yet you build a nest like the birds," Twin remarked.

"So does the harvest mouse over there. But she is building for babies, not for eggs."

The smallest, prettiest mouse the twins had ever seen was weaving a nest in the tops of some wild-oat stems out on the open ground. She had drawn several stems together, and with her fine feet and pearly teeth was plaiting grasses in and out and round about. She was so dainty and light

that when she ran up the stems they scarcely shook. The fairy birds went to watch the building, and Twin flew into the nest and set it rocking. In an instant the mouse was up on the edge, teeth and claws ready for fight

"How dare you! How dare you!" she scolded. "Come out at once. You will spoil my nest. It is for my babies, and no bird shall sit in it. Come out at once."

Twin flew out

"I wouldn't harm your nest," he said. "I only wanted to feel what it was like when it rocked. It is a lovely little nest."

"It is indeed!" said Mother. "Are you going to cover it in?"

The mouse lost her anger and looked happy at the praise of her nest.

"It will be quite covered in," she said. "Round as a ball it will be, with no opening through which hawk or owl may spy my little ones. They will soon be coming into the world, my dear babies. In their pretty cradle I shall lay them, and no one but ourselves shall know the tiny openings through which I shall feed them. The winds will rock them and the sun will shine on them, and through their peep-holes they will see the wide blue sky, yet no enemy shall find them."

"How you will love them!" said Mother.

"I love them already, while they lie softly in my warm body," said the mouse. "That is why I work so hard to make their cradle ready."

From somewhere underground rose the "Love Song of the Mothers."

" There is a hole beside that bush," said Twin. He flew down to look. " It is a rabbit's burrow," he said.

" There must be rabbit babies," said Win. " Let us go in and see."

" Yes," said Mother.

" It will be a tight squeeze for you, Father," called Twin, who was already well into the burrow.

It was a tight squeeze for Father ; he was most uncomfortable, for he felt sure his beautiful feathers would be spoiled.

" I think you and I had better be smaller birds," said Mother. " Let us be goldfinches." And in a moment goldfinches they were, with Baby still perched on Mother's back.

Now the way was easy. They were in a long, winding tunnel, running a foot or two below the surface of the ground. It was rather dark, but to fairy birds that did not matter ; they could see quite well. Another passage branched out from their tunnel, and yet another on the opposite side.

" Shall we go straight on ? " asked Win.

" No. Take the turning on the left. The singing comes from there," said Twin, who was leading.

" What wonderful miners these rabbits are ! " said Father.

They came out into a little round room, and the singing stopped as they entered. A mother rabbit sat there, staring at them in astonishment.

" What do you want ? " she asked. " Why do you come down our burrow ? Go away, little birds ! "

" We are fairy birds," said Mother ; " we are harmless to all creatures. We heard your singing, and so came to see your babies, if we may."

The rabbit moved to show them

"I hid them when I heard you coming," she said; "but if you are fairy birds I am not afraid. Are they not sweet? Such precious, helpless little ones! How I love them!"

Five pink-skinned rabbit babies, with their eyes still tightly closed, lay on the soft bed-floor of the room. Father looked at the floor.

"That is fur that lines the grasses of the bed," he said.

"It is my own fur, pulled from my own body, to make a soft warm couch for my darlings," said the mother.

"Such love!" said Father. "To strip it from yourself for the comfort of your little ones! Oh, nothing is more wonderful than mother-love."

"We must care for the babies, or they would die, such tender little things they are," said the rabbit. "No race can live unless its babies are its greatest care," she added with a wise look in her big brown eyes.

"No truer words were ever spoken," Mother said.

"There is a passage leading out on this other side," said Twin. "May we see what it leads to?"

"Certainly," said the rabbit. "It leads out at the side of a bank. You will find numbers of rabbits there to talk to." She settled down beside her babies, glad to be left in peace again.

They did indeed find rabbits; rabbits everywhere. A father rabbit met them in the tunnel, and blocked the way fiercely, asking what they were doing in his house. They had to explain, and while they were talking rabbits ran from every room and passage to

hear what it was all about, so that the way was choked with heads and ears.

"Off you go!" the big father shouted; and away they all scuttled again. The fairy birds flew out to the bank.

Here rabbits browsed, or sat in their doorways, or ran from place to place. A mother and her six little ones were playing a game. They were well-grown babies, furred and strong, and able to run fast. They would all sit up on their little haunches, watching their mother with eager eyes, while she nibbled at a root in the bank. Suddenly she would thump on the ground and rush into the burrow or under a clump of grasses, her short white tail raised as high in the air as it would go. The babies would run fast after her; next moment out they all came into the open again, and presently the game began afresh.

The fairy birds watched it twice, but couldn't understand it.

"What are they doing?" Father asked an old rabbit who sat near.

"It is the game called Follow the White Flag," replied the rabbit. "Every mother teaches it to her babies, so that they shall know what to do in times of danger."

"But I don't see a flag," said Twin.

"The flag is the mother's tail," the rabbit explained. "When she thumps, that means 'Attention!' When she runs, the babies must follow the white tail wherever it goes. They think the game great fun, but we older ones know that if they were not taught to follow the flag they might lose their

lives, for the rush of the white tail to the burrow is the danger signal of our tribe. It always means ' Make for cover.' "

" Oh, look ! " cried Win. " The mother boxed that one's ears ! She is tumbling him over. It is too bad. The poor little fellow ! Why is she so cruel to him ? "

" Ah, that is Master Disobedience again ! " said the rabbit. " He has to be punished nearly every day to make him attend. He plays with grasses or a stick, and sometimes doesn't run when his mother thumps If she let him go on like that he would never learn to follow the flag, and would never become a fast runner. I don't think he is any good, that one. I think he will come to a bad end. You mark my words, a fox or a dog will get him some day, or perhaps a hawk."

" Oh, I hope not," cried Win. " He looks such a dear little fellow."

" He is disobedient," said the rabbit severely, " and to a wild baby disobedience sooner or later means death. Young ones must learn to obey their mothers."

On the opposite hill a big scout rabbit came running for cover as fast as his legs would carry him. In an instant every rabbit turned and made for his burrow. There was a flash of white tails, and the next moment the bank was as still and bare as if no rabbits lived within a mile of it. Even Master Disobedience had followed the flag this time, as Win was glad to see.

" I wonder what the danger was," she said.

" There it is," said Mother. " A fox."

CHAPTER XVII

PLAY AND SCHOOL

A FINE fox stood for a moment on top of the hill, looked down at the rabbit bank, then disappeared again.

"She knows the rabbits are here, I am sure," said Mother, "but just now she is not hungry. Let us see where she has her den There might be babies."

They flew to overtake the fox. Half-way up the hill they came upon a hare crouching under a clump of grasses. Beside her was her baby.

"Has the fox gone?" she asked of the birds.

"Yes," said Mother. "She went down the hill on the other side."

"That is good," said the hare. "If she saw us I could escape, but my baby is not a day old yet, and could not run fast enough."

"Not a day old!" cried Win. "But she is so big, and her eyes are open, and she has her fur."

"What of all that?" asked the hare.

"The new little rabbit babies have no fur," Twin put in. "Their eyes are shut and they cannot run at all."

"Oh, the rabbit babies!" said the hare scornfully. "I am glad my baby is not so helpless. The rabbit mothers don't keep them long enough in their baby-bags."

"Baby-bags!" exclaimed Win. "I didn't see any. The opossum had one, and so did the kangaroo——"

"Oh, but theirs are on the outside," said the hare. "We have ours inside where they can't be seen. That is why they are so much safer for the babies than any other kind. No enemy can ever find them; the mother protects them with her own life. All the higher mammals are like that."

"What are mammals?" asked Twin.

"Fancy you not knowing what mammals are!" cried the hare. "Why, you are a mammal yourself; I am a mammal; the rabbits are mammals, the squirrels are mammals, and the kangaroos and opossums and mice and foxes and lions and elephants and thousands more. All the creatures that give their babies milk are mammals. Milk is the most perfect food in the world, and that is why the mammals are such splendid creatures and so strong and clever.

"Those silly little rabbit babies come out too soon," she went on. "Think how much trouble it means to their mothers, making those nests and guarding such helpless creatures. Ours don't come out till they are furred and strong. They can run about almost at once. That is a much better plan."

"Don't you make a nest or a burrow?" asked Win.

"Neither nest nor burrow," she replied. "We crouch in a hollow like this when we want to rest or hide, then off we go on our long leaping legs to feed when we are hungry."

"But your little one!—isn't it dangerous for her?" asked Mother. "She has no cover."

"She needs none, so long as she obeys me and lies still," said the hare. "We are so like the colour of the earth and sunburnt grass that if we crouch still upon it we cannot easily be seen. I shall teach my baby to lie so still that an enemy might pass closely and never see her there."

"I shall learn, mother," said the baby earnestly.

"Of course you will, my pet. No harm shall come to you. Mother loves you and will watch over you and teach you till you are old enough to take care of yourself."

"You mothers have each your different plan for your babies," Father said; "and each thinks her way the best. But they all seem good to me, for every plan is suited to the life you lead."

"Yes, that is true," said the hare thoughtfully.

The family went on. The fox had reached her burrow, and had brought up her babies into the sunshine for a romp. They played and ran and tumbled over each other, four beautiful little red-furred creatures with pointed noses and fine ears and soft brown eyes, and "the darlingest tails," as Win said. The mother lay down, and they romped all over her. It was pretty to watch them.

The twins wanted to be big again. Being children in their hearts, they longed to touch the fluffy babies, to hold them and stroke them and feel their softness and silkiness, and to lay them against their faces. But what could tiny birds do, with no hands?

"Do you often play with your babies?" Mother asked.

"Every day," replied the fox. "It is good for them. All young things must have plenty of play.

It makes them strong and quick and ready to run or jump or fight when danger comes. Now for lessons!" she called to her little ones.

They all sat up and looked at her. "Find the wind!" she commanded. The four turned slowly round, remaining still at last with their faces to the wind.

"Smell the wind!" she said. Up went the four pointed noses into the air, snuffing the scents that came blown across the earth.

"Listen to the wind!" was the next order. Down came the noses and up went the four pairs of ears to catch the sounds of bird and beast.

"Repeat the Lesson of the Wind," said the mother. The four little voices repeated together: "We must hunt our prey against the wind, that he may not smell us coming. When we are hunted we must flee down the wind, that our scent may not be carried back to the hunter to tell him where we hide. The wind is our friend, and will bring us news of food or of danger, therefore we must never forget to find the wind and smell the wind and listen to the wind."

"Good!" said the fox. "To-night you shall have your first lesson in hunting Show me how you can spring and catch."

She spread her great brush-tail on the earth, and one after the other the babies sprang at it, sprang again as she moved it swiftly aside, caught it at last, worried at it with queer little growling noises, and pretended to bite it.

Suddenly the tail was jerked high in the air and the fox turned sharply round and cuffed one of the babies with her paw

"That was my tail you bit," she said. "Say the Tail Lesson at once."

"'Mother's tail is for play and practice; we must never bite hard,'" repeated the baby, looking very much ashamed of himself.

"Don't forget it again, or I shall punish you more severely," said his mother. "Now we shall all go home for a nap, so that you may be fresh for the hunt to-night. But first repeat your Greats."

"'Strength is Great, Swiftness is Great, Courage is Great, but Greatest of all is Cunning,'" said the four together; and the fox family disappeared into the burrow.

"Mother," said Win, "I wish we were children again."

"So do I," said Twin.

"I know!" said Mother. "You want your hands back, to stroke the pretty babies. Come to the ship."

They flew to the Cradle Ship, and in a moment Mother had given the whole family their own shapes again.

"This is better," said Twin.

"Delightful!" said Father. He wrote in his notebook:

"It is, of course, a joyful thing
To be a bird of gorgeous feather;
To sail about on easy wing
Through all the bright and sunny weather;

"But listen while I whisper low
The secret sorrow always in it:
It's not all fun, for, you must know,
You miss your hands three times a minute."

They all took their old places in the ship, Mother at the helm, and away it floated high over the trees and then low above the open ground where only grass and little bushes grew.

"We can watch for babies as we go," said Mother

"There are some already," cried Win. "Look, Mother! Oh, the darling little kitties!"

Mother stopped the ship, and the twins were out in a moment. A big grey cat lay in the sun, with five slender, soft-furred kittens romping over her.

"You dears!" cooed Win; and in quick time she and Twin had one each in their hands, stroking and loving the pretty little creatures.

"I know you will not hurt them," said the mother. "but please be very careful, for they are precious."

"We will be very careful," said Win. "How velvety they are! Feel, Twin, how velvety this one is."

"So is this one," said Twin. "Feel its coat."

The kittens snuggled up to them and were quite pleased to be petted; the mother lay blinking comfortably in the sunshine.

Suddenly she started up, every hair in her body standing on end. "Hide!" she said in a quick warning voice, and in a twinkling the kittens slipped into the bush behind her. Even the two in the twins' hands fled, sliding down the twins and disappearing into the bush. A big yellow dog stood a few yards off, nosing and watching; it was he who had roused the mother cat to the defence of her little ones.

She arched her back and raised her tail and spread out all her fur; she spat and hissed, while her eyes flashed fire.

"Go away!" she shrieked. "Go away. I will scratch your eyes out if you come near my babies."

The dog bared his teeth and growled as if he would like to fight; but she looked too fierce. He barked out "Scratch-cat!" then turned and walked away, nosing the ground as if to make believe he had smelt something better than kittens, and really didn't care about them at all.

The cat stayed arched till he was out of sight; then her back and tail and fur dropped slowly into their usual places.

"Come, my darlings!" she called softly, and when the kittens ran to her she licked them and fondled them as if she could never love them enough.

She was thinking.

"I must take you away," she said at last. "Now that he has seen you he will come back while I am away for food. I must find a new home. It will never again be safe to leave you here."

"Our dog doesn't eat kittens," said Twin.

"This one would," she said. "I know him. He is a savage beast. You must hide, my children, while I find a safe place for a home. Then I will come and take you there. Oh, dear! I wish I could be two cats—one to stay and guard you here while the other looks for the home. He might come back while I am gone."

"Where is their father?" asked Twin.

"Goodness knows!" said the cat. "Fathers don't help with the children."

"Some fathers do," said Twin.

"Cat-fathers don't, then. They are too lazy to be troubled with babies. The mothers have to do everything."

"We will mind your little ones while you are away," said Mother. "They can come into the ship and stay here till you return. We will take good care of them, and we shall not sail away."

"It is a splendid idea," said the cat. "You are most kind."

She lifted one of the kittens by the back of its neck, sprang up the side of the ship, and laid the kitten on the cushions.

"Stay there till I come for you," she said. One by one the others were brought up in the same way, then off she slipped through the bushes to find the new home. The twins scrambled into the ship again to play with the kittens.

CHAPTER XVIII

MORE BABIES

PRESENTLY a twig snapped. Mother looked round. Through the bushes two great soft eyes were staring with wonder at the Cradle Ship.

"Come!" said Mother softly, and she held out her fairy hand. With dainty steps, drawn by Mother's gentleness, a lovely fawn came to the side of the ship.

Mother stroked the graceful head and smoothed the velvety sides, dappled with gold and white, and the fawn licked her hand and looked up at her trustfully.

"Pretty dear!" said Mother. "You are very young, I think."

"I am only a baby yet," said the fawn.

Another fawn came out from the bushes and came towards them, and the twins leaned over the side to stroke her.

"It is my sister," said the first one.

"Come away! Come away!" The low call came from the bushes; there the mother could be plainly seen, watching the fawns with anxious eyes. "Come away!" she said again.

"They are quite safe," said Mother. "We love babies, and have come to find out about them. Will you tell us about these?"

The deer came boldly up.

"I see now that you are a fairy," she said; "so I am no longer afraid. But what can I tell you about my little ones except that they are the dearest, prettiest, most charming babies in all the world? And that you can see for yourselves."

"Where did they come from?" asked Win.

"Out of my baby-bag, of course."

"An inside bag, or an outside one?" asked Twin.

"Inside. Nobody has outside bags."

"Oh, yes, they have!" cried Win. "The opossum and the kangaroo have We saw them."

"Oh, those queer creatures! Yes. I forgot them. But they are so few and so old-fashioned, you know. Nearly everybody keeps the bag inside nowadays; it is so much safer and warmer there for the babies." She nodded lovingly at the fawns. "Yes, they grew in there," she went on; "grew in my silky baby-bag till their pretty limbs and big brown eyes and gold-flecked coats were made and finished; then they came out to bring me happiness and to make the world more glad."

"And do you play with them and teach them?" Win asked.

"Of course I do. They have to be taught Wind Lessons, Hide-and-be-still Lessons, and Follow-the-flag Lessons."

"We saw the little rabbits learning that," said Twin

The cat came back. She came so silently, and sprang on the edge of the Cradle Ship so suddenly, that the deer were startled and bounded away through the bushes, the mother with white tail raised high and the fawns following the flag.

"I have found a good place," said the cat. "I will take the kittens one at a time."

"They can go in the Cradle Ship, if you show us where to go," said Mother.

"You are very kind," said the cat politely, "but I would rather take them myself, for I can keep out of sight among the grass and bushes. The dog might follow your ship and find the kittens."

"That is true," said Mother. "But perhaps we could take them half-way for you."

"That would be a help, certainly," said the cat. She stood beside Mother and pointed out the way, and they sailed over the bushes till she said, "Stop here, please!" She lifted a kitten by the loose skin at the back of its neck, jumped off the ship, and disappeared into the bushes.

"Doesn't it hurt when your mother picks you up by your neck?" Win asked the kitten in her arms.

"Not at all. We rather like it," said the kitten. "She is so very gentle."

Five trips had to be made by the cat, but she was quick, and the family had passing babies to watch, so they did not find the time too long.

First there came a snow-white lamb, standing a few yards off to stare at them.

"Ma!" he called. "Ma-a-a! Come here."

"You come here!" his mother's voice replied from a little distance.

"Ma-a-a!" he called again, and his voice this time was fretful.

"Come to me!" called his mother.

"No. Come here. Ma-a-a!" and now his voice was cross.

"That is a spoilt baby," said Mother.

The sheep seemed to think he deserved a scolding.

"I have been too kind to you," she said. "I have looked after you too well. You must not expect me to run about after you when you call. For months I have carried you in my baby-bag, and since you came out I have fed you and watched you and kept you warm at night. You must learn to be grateful and must do what you can to help. If you want your milk you must come for it. I am busy eating grass to make it."

"But, Ma-a-a, I don't know what these are!"

"Oh, is there danger?" and with a bound and a rush the sheep was beside him, staring at the Cradle Ship. "They are only people," she said. "They won't hurt you. Come away." And away they went.

"Oh! look in the grass," cried Twin. "What are those?"

"They are young jerboas," said the cat, returning for her second-to-last kitten.

A band of golden-furred creatures, not much bigger than mice, were leaping round the ship.

"They have such long back legs and such tiny front ones," said Twin. "And such very long tails!"

"And what big brown eyes!" said Win. "Oh, they are fighting. They are all trying to hurt that thin one. Look! They catch him every time he tries to run away. Now they are all round him. They are biting him. They are pulling his fur out. Oh, the cruel little things! Twin, we must go and stop them." She was out of the ship already, with Twin following her

"Shoo! Shoo! Leave the poor little thing alone," she cried, running among the jerboas.

They stared at her with their big brown eyes.

"But he is ill and ugly," said one. "We don't like him about. We want to drive him away."

"Or kill him," said another.

"How cruel of you!" cried Win indignantly. "If he is ill you should be kind to him."

The jerboas stared harder than ever.

"What an idea!" they all cried.

"Look out—he is off!" cried one. The whole pack went leaping after him with a speed that took them out of sight in an instant; the twins were left to gaze into the empty grass.

"They are quite right to kill him or drive him away," said the cat. "He is thin and miserable, and I noticed that his legs were crooked and shaky, so he has evidently got some disease. No tribe wants a creature like that about. He can do so much harm, you know."

"We don't know," said Win, much puzzled. "What harm can the poor thing do?"

"Well, he perhaps can't do much now while he is young," said the cat, "but if they let him grow into a father jerboa he will make sick babies. The little grains the fathers give the mothers must always be strong and healthy, or how can the babies be strong and healthy? If there is disease in the grains there will be disease in the babies, and no tribe wants bad babies. Everybody knows that healthy babies are the most important things in the world."

"Oh, I didn't think of that," said Win. "It is like That Dreadful Garden, isn't it, Twin? Do

you remember how afraid the flower fairies were that the bad pollen would be brought to make bad babies in their flowers?"

"Yes," replied Twin. "I suppose the jerboas are afraid too."

"They are rather young to think it all out yet," said the cat, "but the feeling is there; all young animals are born with it. They can't bear sick creatures about. The older ones know why, and they know that by driving them away the race is kept strong."

"It would never do to let him make poor little sick babies," said Win.

"That is what I think," said the cat. "It is better for him to be driven away than for ever so many little ones to suffer. We must have good fathers."

"Yet he can't help being ill," said Twin.

"Oh, yes, he can. It is sure to be his own fault," said the cat. "He ate something his mother told him not to eat, I expect, or went into dirty places, or drank something with danger in it; and so he got the disease. And then his punishment came. It always does." She went off with her kitten in her mouth, and the twins went back to the ship.

A Shetland pony came through the bushes, looking for the sweetest bits of grass. By her side ran her little brown foal.

"Oh, what a pet!" cried Win.

"Yes, isn't she a dear!" said the mother. "I love her so much that I can't bear her out of my sight." She put her head over the edge of the ship to have her nose rubbed. "It is only a week since

she came," she said, " but she was in my baby-bag for the greater part of a year, so I have had plenty of time to learn to love her." She took her head away to stroke her little one.

" What long legs she has ! " said Twin.

" Yes ; they were as long as that when she was born," said the mother. " Even on that day she was able to run beside me, though certainly her legs were rather weak and wobbly at first. But they soon grew strong, and now she can go long distances with me. That is necessary, for I must search for good grass, that I may make plenty of milk for her. Come, Baby, I see a green patch over there."

The cat came for her last kitten.

" Good-bye," she said as she went off. " You have done me a good turn in minding my babies."

" Good-bye, little kitty," called Win. " I wish your mother could have spared you to stay with me and come away to my place."

" I could never spare her," said the cat.

" And I couldn't spare my mummy," called the kitten in her tiny voice.

Mother steered the ship high into the air.

" It is almost time to be turning homewards," she said ; " but let us sail over those further hills first, and round the coast."

They went quickly, for evening was coming on ; yet as they looked below they still saw babies everywhere.

Passing over a tree, they almost touched the head of a giraffe that was poked through the branches, nibbling the leaves. Far down at the giraffe's side

stood her baby, so like the mother that the twins could see no difference except in size.

"That queer ship nearly gave you a bump on your nose, mother," they heard the baby say.

Far among the hills were many baby homes. In one a mother lion played with her charming, frolicsome cubs, and her eyes were mild and loving as she looked at them. In another a bear had set her little ones to practise the "Catch and Hug." In a stream that flowed from the hills an otter was teaching her babies to swim, pushing them into the water when they were afraid.

"You must swim before you can earn your living," she told them; "so begin at once."

Over mountains and streams, forests and plains went the Cradle Ship, and everywhere there were babies and careful mothers.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SWEETEST BABY OF ALL

THEY came to the coast. On a tiny hill overlooking the edge of the sea lay a beautiful garden, gay with poppies and geraniums and Canterbury bells, and sweet with roses and stocks and pinks. In it, at the end of a winding path that came up from the sea, stood the prettiest, daintiest little house! Its roof was red, its walls were white, two latticed windows stood open to the summer air, and through the door one could see how clean and pretty and cosy it was inside.

"Oh, Mother, do let us go down to see who lives there," Win begged.

Mother steered the ship to a grass patch in the garden, and they all stepped out and walked up the winding path. From within the house came the sound of a sweet voice singing. "Listen!" said Mother. They all stopped to hear. It was the "Love Song of the Mothers," sung with such tenderness that it brought the tears to Mother's eyes. The singer was at the second verse.

"Hope of the hours! The sun is bright,
The beautiful sky is blue.
Dream of the days! The world all alight,
Is glad with its welcome to you.

" Life of my life, so loved, so near!
We waited, the world and I.
Joy of my heart, most precious, most dear
How sweet in your beauty you lie."

The song ceased They went on. Through the open door they could now see a pretty lady, young and golden-haired, sitting on a low stool with a baby in her arms. Her face was down; she was gazing at the baby as if she could never take her eyes away. But when Father knocked she looked up, and they saw that her eyes were shining with love and her mouth was curved with kisses.

" Come in!" she said. " Ah! you have a baby too. We shall be friends at once." She smiled at Mother, and Mother smiled back at her and sat down on a stool beside her as if they had known each other for a long time. The twins sat on the floor at Mother's feet, looking at the two babies, and Father sat on the doorstep.

" We have been all over Babyland to see the babies," said Mother, and she told the lady of some they had seen. " But yours is the sweetest of all," she said at the finish.

" Oh, sweet indeed!" said the mother. " So sweet that I must sing for joy all day. And when her father comes home at night he sings with me, and he says, ' Our love and care shall always guard our little one.' For he, too, finds her sweet."

" Yes," said Mother gently, and she and Father looked at Baby and the twins with tender eyes.

" How wonderful it is to have a child!" said the mother. " For months she lay and grew in the

silken baby-bag beneath my heart; and how we loved the thought of her! We talked of her coming. I said, 'She was only a tiny egg at first, like all the other babies in the world, but now she is growing her beautiful hands and feet and her dear blue eyes. We must make ready for her.'

"So her father hurried to finish the building of this little house, while I made the dainty hangings, and the soft wrappings she would need. We were like two birds building a nest for our little one, but it was a nest that must last for many years. Father built the walls and roof, and I lined it cosily; and out in the garden we spread bright colours and gay scents, that beauty might be all around our baby in her nest.

"She came at last, to show us her beautiful hands and feet and her dear blue eyes. How glad, how very glad we were! I sang the 'Love Song of the Mothers,' and have sung it ever since Our love for her grows greater with our care. Her father goes each day to bring the food, and I stay here with her, to keep her warm and washed and safe. At night we plan for her, and talk of how she must be trained."

"There is much to do," said Father from the doorway, thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said, "there is much to do. The babies of the birds and beasts are taught before they are turned out into the world, and our babies have still more need of teaching, for their life will be long and difficult. They need all the strength and all the wisdom we can give them, these helpless, precious little ones. Their lives begin in us, and they depend

on us. We must never shirk the training; we must prepare them for what may come to them."

Her face was bright with hope.

"We, who gave her life, will do our best to teach our baby how to use that life," she said. "There is indeed much to do. There is the body to be trained; little hands and feet and tongue must all be helped and guided till they can be used with skill Then there is the beautiful mind, which will grow and blossom under our tender care, reaching out and out, trying to understand everything—the flowers, and the stars, and the joy and sorrow of the world; till the spirit is filled and warmed with love and rich glad thoughts and goes seeking all the kindness it may do."

"You have high thoughts for your little one," said Mother very softly.

"We must aim high, if we are to do our best for them—is it not so?" she asked. "You too—you bring your children to Babyland that they may begin to understand their lives and all the love that fills the world.

"And their father comes with you, helping in your work," she went on quietly. "Among the birds and beasts only a few fathers have learned to help; most take no thought for their little ones. Our babies are better off, for their fathers give a share of care and love. Two parents are better than one, for one can guard while the other brings the food, and both can teach. Men and women should grow up nobler than the beasts, for they have a longer, safer childhood, in which they may learn how best to live."

"Behind the Ship there floated up a band of Fairies"

The father had come in. He stood looking down on the mother and child.

"Yes," he said, "when I remember that our little one's lifelong happiness hangs on the start we give her now, I feel that no care can be too great, no teaching too wise. She must be taught obedience, that she may be guarded from the dangers all abou(while she is young; and then every sense and power must be trained, that she may be fitted for a life of ioy and usefulness when she goes out into the world."

"It is love that speaks in you both, and love is the greatest thing in the world," said Mother. She rose to go.

"Thank you for your gentle words and all they have taught my children, you happy-hearted mother," she said, and she kissed the pretty lady as if she were a sister. "Good-bye! Good-bye! Come, Win and Twin; it is time to sail for home."

As the Cradle Ship rose into the air the twins left their seats and snuggled in beside Mother, laying their curly heads against her.

"Baby grew in a silky baby-bag under your heart, Mother," said Win.

"Under my heart," said Mother.

"So did we," said Win. "Oh, Mother, how dear you are! How I love you!"

"So do I," said Twin, hugging her.

"So do I," said Father, smiling happily.

"Twin, isn't it lovely to think we were not put under prickly gooseberry bushes!" said Win; "nor even laid in a nest to hatch, like the birds!"

"Nor even kept in an outside bag like the kangaroo baby," said Twin.

"We were warm and safe inside," said Win, and Mother wanted us and loved us all the time."

Behind the ship there floated up a band of fairies, tall and bright-winged and gossamer-robed.

"Good-bye, Fairy Mother," they called. "We have watched you at your splendid work. When will you come again?"

"When Baby is ready to learn I will come," Mother called back gaily, and she steered the Cradle Ship for home.

Across the sky the sunset flamed in red and gold. In the Cradle Ship Father and the twins watched its glories and thought long thoughts, and Baby fell asleep on Mother's knee and smiled in his dreams as if he, too, were gazing at beautiful sights. Mother looked by turns at him and their shining way, and sang a soft little lullaby:

"Lands and hills in golden sky,
Rose-red hills that blush and die,
Sunset lands where dream birds fly!
World's dear wonder, sleep, oh sleep.

"Whisper-songs the dream birds sing;
Whisper-words the dream birds bring.
Low they float on whisper-wing!
World's dear wonder, sleep, oh sleep.

"What the words they bring to you?
Closed your eyes, the sky's own blue!
Yet, like stars, your smiles break through—
World's dear wonder, sleep, oh sleep."

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